

DISCIPLESHIP IN A PLATEAUED CHURCH PLANT

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

Every church should pray and think through its approach to discipleship within its unique ministry context. This project is designed to help normal pastors and church leaders in their effort by describing how SouthPointe Christian Church addressed its plateau by focusing on discipleship. The process and discoveries made through this thesis-project will give church leaders a point from which to start their own journey.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **DISCIPLESHIP IN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN CHURCH**

### **Introduction**

“Providence, Rhode Island,” he said across the table. “It is one of the biggest cities in the least churchd part of the country: New England.<sup>1</sup> Not only is New England post-Christian, but it is also among the least charitable areas<sup>2</sup> in the United States.” These words came from the executive director of Restoration House Ministries.<sup>3</sup> “Our goal is to plant a cluster of four churches in and around Providence. I believe those churches could not only work together, but they would multiply. They would seek to start additional campuses and plant more churches. We have already started the first, NorthPointe Christian Church, and we’d like you to start the second.”

Restoration House Ministries (RHM) has a vision of “a transformed spiritual landscape of New England and beyond with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” This vision will be reached by continually focusing on the mission of “partnering with the church to transform the spiritual

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1. “2017 Bible-Minded Cities,” Barna, June 22, 2017, accessed August 26, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/2017-bible-minded-cities/>. Providence was rated as the third least Bible-minded city. Here’s how Barna describes their research: “Each year, Barna and American Bible Society rank the nation’s top media markets based on their level of Bible engagement. Individuals considered to be Bible-minded are those who report reading the Bible in the past week and who strongly assert the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches. This definition captures action and attitude—those who both engage and esteem the Christian scriptures. The rankings thus reflect an overall openness or resistance to the Bible in various U.S. cities.”

2. “America’s Most and Least Charitable States,” 247wallst.com, accessed July 6, 2015, <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2011/12/15/americas-most-and-least-charitable-states>. New England states made up half of the top eight least charitable states.

3. In a conversation with me in the summer of 2010, Dan Clymer shared the gospel need in New England and the vision of Restoration House Ministries, and offered me the lead planter role for SouthPointe Christian Church

landscape of New England and beyond with the Gospel of Jesus.” The word “transformed” is used intentionally<sup>4</sup> and means “to be changed internally and externally.”<sup>5</sup> RHM’s vision is to catalyze gospel-motivated life transformation in New England people.

Multiplying campuses and churches would not be easy in Rhode Island. The whole Northeast has witnessed a steady decline in church attendance in recent decades,<sup>6</sup> and there were zero multisite churches in the whole state at that time.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Setting**

SouthPointe Christian Church started on October 30, 2011, with a multilayered vision. SouthPointe’s goal is to catalyze gospel-motivated life transformation. This is communicated through the vision statement, “For everyone to experience God’s unconditional love.” While education, counseling, healing, becoming separate from the world, or even social compassion are important, God’s love transforms people inside and out. God intends his love to be experienced. This vision is reinforced by five culture statements, or core values, by which SouthPointe seeks to function consistently: We believe you matter to God; we share life; we believe church is a

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4. I believe I can confidently represent the views of this organization. I was initially approached about succeeding the founder. Though I did not ultimately accept, I have been a member of the governing board since 2014 and currently function as board president.

5. Though this concept is foundational in the New Testament, the main word (μεταμορφόω) is used only four times. Both uses in the gospel are external in nature, as they describe the external transformation of Jesus at the Transfiguration, while both uses by Paul describe an internal transformation (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18).

6. David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle, chap 4, “The Northeast.”

7. At the time of this writing, there are only two.

team sport,<sup>8</sup> we grab a broom,<sup>9</sup> we celebrate stories.<sup>10</sup> Second, the word “everyone” was specifically chosen in this vision statement in order not to limit the vision to one church, city, or even state. It was chosen to allow for future multiplication. SouthPointe focuses its energy in three areas: Sunday gatherings, relational environments,<sup>11</sup> and serving, especially in the community.<sup>12</sup>

The first three years of SouthPointe’s existence were marked by quantitative growth and qualitative transformation. Quantitatively, SouthPointe’s attendance, the number of people making first-time decisions for Christ, the percentage of people in small groups, and collective generosity all grew steadily.

One hundred twenty-two people attended the first service, which included supporters from the Restoration House network of churches, as well as locals. The attendance gradually increased and remained steady for the last two months of 2011, as SouthPointe averaged 139 people. In 2012, the average Sunday attendance increased to 168. And in 2013 and 2014, 250 and 266 attended each Sunday, respectively.

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8. SouthPointe Christian Church, “We Exist So Everyone Can Experience God’s Unconditional Love,” <https://www.southpointeri.com/this-is-us>, accessed August 19, 2019. “We want to help people reach their God-given potential because we each bring something unique to the table.”

9. SouthPointe Christian Church, “We Exist . . . ,” “We strive to be a church where people are constantly looking for ways to serve each other and the surrounding community. When we see a need, we meet it. No one is above anybody, so no task is below anybody.”

10. SouthPointe Christian Church, “We Exist . . . ,” “Stories of grace and stories of redemption. We believe the church should throw the best parties because the things we celebrate have an eternal impact. As God moves, let our lives be testimonies of an unshakeable, life-changing God.”

11. Largely, this means small groups. However, SouthPointe started a branch of Celebrate Recovery in 2015.

12. Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006). This work expresses a similar approach.



These attendance numbers were reinforced by people making faith decisions and being baptized. Eleven people were baptized in 2011, even though SouthPointe only existed for nine weeks. In 2012, that number of baptisms increased to 23. SouthPointe baptized 38 people in 2013, 19 in 2014, and 30 more people in 2015. This life transformation did not end with baptism, but participation in small groups also grew. By 2014, the number of people involved in groups was equivalent to SouthPointe's Sunday morning adult attendance.<sup>13</sup>

SouthPointe's collective generosity also increased. The greatest indicator of generosity happened when SouthPointe was fourteen months old and decided to give away one Sunday's offer to meeting needs locally and globally. Though the attendance was less than 200 and the average Sunday offering was \$2,500, SouthPointe gave away more than \$27,000. That number increased to \$32,000 the next year, and \$42,000 and \$43,000 in subsequent years.

This quantitative growth was matched by qualitative success metrics. Internally, people were sharing stories of gospel-motivated life change. Externally, SouthPointe was building trust in the community through relationships.<sup>14</sup> Two such examples demonstrate the fostering of trust within the community: I was invited to a quarterly gathering of community leaders from different agencies, and I was invited to represent the faith-based community at a mandatory monthly parole and probation forum.

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13. For clarification, not every adult was in a home group. For example, SouthPointe averaged just over 200 adults per Sunday morning, but not every adult attended every week. Therefore, there were more than 200 adults who claimed SouthPointe as their church home.

14. To understand completely the importance of community relationships, the reader must understand Rhode Island's culture. Rhode Island has a "know a guy" culture, which according to Billy Mitchell's parody song of the same name, is how things get done here and how we get by. See Billy Mitchell, "I Know a Guy," The Rhode Show, WPRI, March 9, 2014, accessed August 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mf0gYVhyeVY>.

It appeared that SouthPointe was achieving its vision of life transformation and was on its way to multiplication.

### **The Problem**

However, SouthPointe began to plateau and even began to decline in the above-mentioned discipleship metrics. SouthPointe's 2015 attendance remained the same as that in 2014. It gradually decreased in 2016 and 2017. By 2018, the attendance decreased to 230. The total number of baptisms over three years was 29, which was the twelve-month average from November 2011 to December 2015. The percentage of people in groups gradually dropped to 40 percent of adult attendance.

SouthPointe's early growth followed by a plateau is not unique, as a survey of 200,000 churches conducted by the American Church Research Project reveals. Olsen includes these results in *The American Church in Crisis*. Through research, "this book not only gives a realistic picture that confirms hunches and explodes myths, but it provides insight into how the church must change to reach a new and changed world with the gospel."<sup>15</sup>

Age is one factor in a church's growth trend. The average church plant experiences growth the first three years, slowed growth in years 4 through 10, a plateau in years 11 through 30, and decline thereafter.<sup>16</sup> SouthPointe's "normal" growth trend makes it an ideal candidate to test a thesis. A series of general questions follows this research: "Why does a church plant's growth plateau after three years? What would it take to prevent that plateau in the first place? Or,

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15. Olsen, *American Church in Crisis*, cover flap.

16. Olson, *American Church in Crisis*, chap. 5, "Age."

what would be required to reverse that trend in a real-life church plant with a sustained plateau or decline?”

There is no shortage of situational answers to these questions, as there are many factors that might cause plateau or even decline, as my experience and other resources detail. Internal or external circumstances may affect a church’s growth trend. A leader’s control over these situations also varies. Key families may move away, the economy of a certain community may take a hit, or there may be natural disasters. The denomination or church planting organization could be experiencing trial, and the effect could spill onto the church plant. A leader’s emotional,<sup>17</sup> spiritual,<sup>18</sup> physical, or family health may suffer.<sup>19</sup> The meeting location may no longer be optimal,<sup>20</sup> mission drift may set in,<sup>21</sup> a leadership transition may not go smoothly, or the leaders may not possess the appropriate gifting. Or, there may be a spiritual attack (Eph

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17. Peter Scazzero with Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

18. Olson, *American Church in Crisis*, chap 8, “How Can a Church Counter the Debilitating Effects of Age?” “Spirituality, chemistry, and strategy are listed in the order of development. If a pastor leads with strategy first, the congregation will miss the spiritual dynamic. Feeling that human effort rather than divine initiative is driving the church forward, the members will often react negatively. When the first priority is chemistry, with little attention given to spirituality and strategy, the members may like each other, but little will be accomplished for God’s kingdom. When spirituality and chemistry are in place, then add strategy, and the three will produce fruitful growth.”

19. SouthPointe’s executive pastor’s wife has been diagnosed with cancer twice in the last two years. Treatment has confined her to home. In addition, both he and his wife each lost their only living parent to cancer during this same period.

20. For example, Restoration House Ministries has planted nearly twenty churches and has never had a totally mobile plant average more than 300.

21. Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014).

6:10-18). Each of those is a legitimate factor, but the exploration of each is beyond this project, and many church planting resources have detailed many such reasons.<sup>22</sup>

While each of these reasons may be valid, my assumption is that a root cause for a church's negative growth trend exists. Kevin Ford illustrates this idea in the introduction of *Transforming Church*. He desired a perfect lawn at his family's new northern Virginia home. After clearing brush, barbed wire, and old fence, he planted grass. His lawn became lush green shortly after this initial effort. However, this picturesque lawn did not last through the first summer. Crabgrass, ugly weeds, and brown patches replaced the green grass. Even after many attempts by professional lawn care companies, he still had no success. It was only after advice from an experienced friend (Mark) did he learn, "The problem is not the grass. The problem is the soil."<sup>23</sup> Mark suggested that a process that would not be quick but would address the health of the soil, and the process produced a healthy lawn.

This illustrates Olsen's research and SouthPointe's experience. How does a church plant create a healthy soil to produce sustained transformation? My assumption is that the general answer to this question is discipleship. I also assume that a church cannot multiply into other churches or campuses without first multiplying leaders, and that a church cannot multiply leaders without first multiplying disciples.<sup>24</sup>

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22. "General Assessments," Church Multiplication Network, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://churchmultiplication.net/assessment>.

23. Kevin Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to the Great* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 17-18.

24. Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Church Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

A brief definition of both *disciple* and *discipleship* is needed to clarify this general reasoning since it is defined in a variety of ways today. Michael J. Wilkins clarifies both terms. “A disciple of Jesus has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> “Disciple” is the primary term used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus’ followers and is the term used in the early church to denote followers of him. This means “Discipleship is the ongoing process of growth as a disciple. Discipling implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another grow as disciples.”<sup>26</sup>

A general answer to general questions will not suffice in addressing this crisis, though. It is my assumption that the vast majority of churches represented in the *American Church in Crisis* study have made an effort to disciple people beyond Sunday. Those may range from small groups, Sunday school, gender-focused groups, special interest groups, or even one-on-one discipleship.

Likewise, SouthPointe has sought to disciple people from the beginning, mainly through home groups.<sup>27</sup> SouthPointe’s groups have evolved three times through its history. First, groups followed the “biblical storytelling”<sup>28</sup> model developed and made popular through Real-Life

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25. Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 40.

26. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 41.

27. With the exception of Celebrate Recovery.

28. Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

Ministries in Idaho.<sup>29</sup> Biblical storytelling involves four stages in a group discussion: a designated person tells the biblical narrative in her or his own words, the group then collectively retells the story, the biblical text is read, and finally the group answers the question, “What was left out in the original telling of the story?” Second, SouthPointe groups transitioned to a sermon-based discussion model based on the approach of Larry Osborne.<sup>30</sup> Questions were developed around the sermon’s main point and biblical text. Third and most recently, SouthPointe’s approach to group discipleship reflected Nelson Searcy’s approach.<sup>31</sup> Each group was given freedom to select their own study for discussion.

Each of these models provides a slightly different aim, and each experienced varying degrees of success.<sup>32</sup> But there were two consistencies in each approach: learning and relational bonding. Each taught group participants about the gospel, prayer, serving, spiritual disciplines, evangelism, and even discipleship through groups. Relationships were formed during each approach. I assume other average American churches have also witnessed growth in knowledge and relational bonding through their discipleship efforts, whether they have adopted one of these models, a different model of small groups, or Sunday school. Yet, though knowledge and the formation of relationships are important, the plateau and decline still continue.

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29. The three couples who made up SouthPointe’s launch team even flew to Real-Life’s campus for a three-day immersion into this process.

30. Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

31. Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008).

32. Like the overall church, a number of factors contributed to the success, such as the dedication of a full-time staff person to oversee groups at various times.

## The Thesis

If church plants plateau and decline due to the general area of discipleship, despite churches making discipleship efforts, more specific questions are needed. Is there something missing from these general discipleship approaches? And, if so, will this missing element indeed catalyze transformation and multiplication? The relevance for the exploration of these questions extends beyond church plants to established churches and calls for a more specific answer. The answer to these questions, I believe, is, “Yes. Shared, soul-training experiences are missing from common discipleship approaches today.”

My thesis is, “Shared, soul-training experiences will result in greater transformation than knowledge-based discipleship.” This transformation will be measured by the following discipleship metrics: daily devotions, sacrificial generosity, service in the community, and the sharing of personal testimonies, in addition to the total number of baptisms and the breaking of strongholds.

Each word in the phrase “shared, soul-training experiences” is critical in creating transformation and multiplying discipleship. First, experiences must supplement mere knowledge. Timothy Keller highlights the power of experience<sup>33</sup> in the account of the Transfiguration.

It’s one thing to know that the glorious Creator God loves you, cares for you, holds you, but it’s another thing to sense it, to experience it. Whatever life brings you, you will need those foretastes to nourish and strengthen you. The transfiguration is not just a

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33. Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2011), 129. The way he sets up this teaching is helpful. “It’s one thing to be told that somebody is remarkably attractive. You believe it, but when you actually see him or her up close, you say, ‘Oh, wow.’ What happened? Did you get new information? No—you’re *experiencing* what you already knew to be true. Somebody says, ‘This restaurant is unbelievable; it’s the best.’ You believe what you’re told, but when you go there and eat, you’re still bowled over. Did you get new information? No—you’re *experiencing* what you already knew to be true.”

miraculous parlor trick to convince the disciples of Jesus's deity. It is an experience of collective worship that they are going to need for what's ahead. Jesus's discipleship clearly included giving his disciples such experiences.<sup>34</sup>

Such experiences are transformative when qualified by two additional descriptions. They must be "shared" and "seek to train one's soul." These experiences must be shared with a small group of people with whom one is in relationship, not only the general church. This concentration on a small group is not to diminish the value of either corporate worship or individual spiritual disciplines. Corporate worship and encouragement for individual spiritual disciplines have been present throughout SouthPointe's history. My assumption is this is also true of most American churches. While others may test the importance of those elements, my project is limited to testing these shared discipleship experiences.

Second, these shared experiences should be "soul-training" in nature. The term "soul-training" comes from James Bryant Smith and is one of the three pillars of transformation in his work about discipleship. "Once we have the right narratives in place, we need to deepen them in the rest of our lives through specific activities that are aimed at making the narratives real not only to our minds but to our bodies and souls. . . . They are wise practices that train and transform our hearts. . . . When we engage in the spiritual disciplines as *soul-training* exercises, we are doing so to change lives."<sup>35</sup> While shared experiences, such as dinners or concerts together, are important for relationship building, these experiences alone do not catalyze gospel-motivated life change. These experiences also need an element of soul-training.

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34. Keller, *Jesus the King*, 129.

35. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 26-27.



## The Hypothesis

SouthPointe is addressing this current gap in discipleship by beginning a curriculum called Rooted. Rooted is a ten-week experience aimed at life change. It provides shared, soul-training experiences for groups, in addition to teaching and relationships. It is not less than a program, seminar, or typical group, but it seeks to be more.

There are four reasons Rooted makes sense to address SouthPointe's current hole in discipleship. The first two reasons are related to important consistencies with SouthPointe, while the latter two are related to positive inconsistencies with SouthPointe. Rooted shares an aligned vision with SouthPointe, as well as a similar assessment of the problem facing the American church. These consistencies indicate that SouthPointe and Rooted share belief about the starting point and the end goal of discipleship.

However, *Rooted* also has two important inconsistencies. *Rooted's* discipleship results are positively inconsistent with SouthPointe and that of the American church. Thousands of people have experienced life change through this curriculum. Given these results amid a shared vision and assessment of the problem, one should ask, "What does Rooted provide that SouthPointe does not, concerning discipleship?" Rooted provides shared, soul-training experiences for its participants, which is *the* difference from SouthPointe's previous group curriculum. I will explore each of these four reasons in greater detail.

Like SouthPointe and Restoration House Ministries, Rooted is driven by gospel-motivated life transformation and multiplication. This curriculum seeks to help participants see God in fresh ways, discern his voice in unexpected places, find their place in God's story, and experience a new way of life, full of community, intimacy, and generosity. It prompts boldness to

live out one's calling as a follower of Jesus among friends and neighbors, making a difference in the world.<sup>36</sup>

This vision can be traced back to two churches in different parts of the world which first developed *Rooted*: Mavuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya, and Mariners Church in Orange County, California. These two churches began a partnership in 2008. Pastor Muriithi Wanjau at Mavuno Church had developed a ten-week experience called Mizizi, which is Swahili for “roots.” It was not a Bible study, class, or program, and it was not taught in the traditional sense. It was a journey taken by church members in community with one another in order to be transformed and then fearlessly change the world. People would gather do daily homework, gather weekly, walk through Scripture, and discover God's purpose for their lives.<sup>37</sup>

Mariners Church also “wanted to create an experience that bridged the disparity between what we say we believe and how we live. We wanted something that would be experiential and transferable across all ages, stages, and even cultures.”<sup>38</sup> They learned of Mizizi and its impact while on a visit to Mavuno Church. They wondered what God might do if they brought Mizizi to Orange County. They began working with Mavuno to adapt the experience to their culture, while maintaining the original heart.

Both parties noticed their “similar passion to see people encounter God and grow deeper in their relationship with Him and His church.”<sup>39</sup> The collective vision of these two churches is

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36. Mariners Church, *Rooted: Connect with God, the Church, Your Purpose* (2011), version 2.0, 7.

37. *Rooted*, 8, 14.

38. *Rooted*, 8.

39. *Rooted*, 9.

based on Acts 2:42-47. In this short passage, modern readers observe how the early church responded to its experience with God and the vision given to it by preaching, teaching, and baptizing. Both churches believed the vision of Acts 2 is the same for the church today. Jesus' followers today are also "to reach those around us with the love and healing power of Jesus Christ and to change that industry or vacation so it becomes an outpost of God's Kingdom influence!"<sup>40</sup>

Pastor Wanjau desired this gospel-motivated transformation multiply beyond his local church, just as SouthPointe did not want to limit its vision statement to one church, city, or even state.<sup>41</sup> He called participants to be community influencers as a way to see change: "As people are attracted to a relationship with Jesus because of the way we live, families change. Neighborhoods change. Cities change. When a city has changed, it garners the attention of its country, then its continent. And when a continent has changed, the world will notice. The world will be one for Jesus Christ."<sup>42</sup> This vision of gospel-motivated life transformation and multiplication makes sense in SouthPointe's context.

*Rooted's* assessment of the situation facing the church is also consistent with SouthPointe's. Whereas the vision describes the end goal, the assessment describes the starting place. Both Mariners Church and Mavuno Church express a similar assessment of the current state of the church. Mariners Church believes American churches "have traditionally relied on theological information as the primary activator for life-change. While information certainly has

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40. *Rooted*, 13.

41. Similarly, RHM included the words "and beyond" in its vision statement.

42. *Rooted*, 13.

a place, it should not be the only way the church invites people to participate in God's story. Christians in the Western world know a lot of information, but don't often experience the life transformation promised in the Scriptures."<sup>43</sup>

A similar assessment is given by Pastor Muriithi Wanjau of the Mavuno Church:

Some think the world is ignorant, so we must focus on teaching and education. Some churches believe the world is sick and in need of deliverance, so they focus on counseling and healing. There are churches who believe that the world is evil and Christians must separate themselves from the rest. Some churches believe the world is lost. People need salvation and rescue from hell. There are churches that focus on compassion, believing the world is needy and hurting.<sup>44</sup>

Pastor Wanjau continues by affirming the truth and goodness of each effort. But his assessment is that such efforts have diverted the church's attention from what is best. The church must refocus on discipleship to turn ordinary disciples into world changers.

He extends his assessment beyond the church, collectively. This problem demonstrates itself within individuals' discipleship. Disciples develop through four stages of growth: from complacent to consumer, from consumer to connected, from connected to committed, and from committed to compelled. The first step is to move from complacency to consumer. A consumer consumes God and faith but can be very self-focused. People need connection with others to develop further. Jesus demonstrates this principle by giving his own disciples experiences such as working together, eating together, and learning from Jesus together. "It is very difficult to grow in our relationship with Christ without people walking through life with you, celebrating wonderful moments and grieving tragic moments. We love and serve each other and our

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43. *Rooted*, 8.

44. *Rooted*, 12.

communities like the disciples did.”<sup>45</sup> This connection is only solidified by committing oneself to God, affecting his kingdom, serving one’s community, and living for the purpose God designed. This committed disciple must be compelled in order to take action.

This assessment of the collective need to refocus attention on discipleship, as well as how individuals grow prompted the development of *Rooted*. While there was recognition that discipleship is more than a ten-week journey, this experience was seen as “a first step into the spiritual journey of seeking to fearlessly change the world.”<sup>46</sup>

This combination of an aligned vision and a consistent assessment prompted the partnership of these two churches from different parts of the world. I also share this vision and assessment, which gives weight to the use of *Rooted*’s curriculum at SouthPointe. But there are two key differences between *Rooted* and SouthPointe, which also reinforce this decision.

*Rooted*’s discipleship results are much greater than SouthPointe’s or that of the average American church, thus highlighting a third reason for testing. Even in *Rooted*’s infancy, thousands of individuals were being impacted through Mizizi in Nairobi, almost beyond what the Mavuno Church could handle. Individuals were discovering for the first time that God loved them specifically, had power to break Satan’s strongholds in their lives, had a beautiful plan for their lives, and had gifted each of them for God’s purposes. Not only did they learn about prayer, but also they took steps toward being compelled: they learned how to unleash the power of the

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45. *Rooted*, 13.

46. *Rooted*, 12.

Spirit, they discovered God's heart for serving and for stewarding the resources he had given them, and they believed that they were called to be fearless influencers of society.<sup>47</sup>

The impact was not limited to their church, but it went far beyond. Their community began to change. Friends and family members of Mizizi participants witnessed such dramatic life change that their curiosity was provoked. They wanted to know why and how this transformation was happening. They began signing up in droves, and the Good News was proving to be good news.<sup>48</sup> God's work through this journey became clear to leaders. They realized that "it wasn't the curriculum that was changing lives. It was God. People came with open hearts; expectant of what God would show them. And He did not disappoint. Relationships were mended, strongholds were broken, and people sensed God's call to go out and change their community in ways they never thought they could."<sup>49</sup>

Similar results been witnessed as *Rooted* has been translated across cultures. Mariners Church claims that 90 percent of *Rooted* groups have gone on to become ongoing life groups, 82 percent increase their generosity, and 70 percent increase their serving.<sup>50</sup> The results of *Rooted* are vastly different from what is reported in *The American Church in Crisis*, as well as the experience of SouthPointe. Therefore, it is worth testing in SouthPointe's context.

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47. *Rooted*, 8-9.

48. *Rooted*, 9.

49. *Rooted*, 9.

50. Allen White, "How Mariners' Rooted Journey Grows Groups, Service and Giving," Taking the Guesswork Out of Groups (blog), April 25, 2016, accessed August 26, 2019, <http://allenwhite.org/2016/04/25/mariners-rooted-journey-grows-groups-service-giving/>.

Fourth, *Rooted* is worth testing because it provides a different path from the assessment of the problem to the vision. How is it distinct from SouthPointe discipleship? The answer is not the content. *Rooted* is built around seven rhythms: daily devotion, prayer, freedom from strongholds, sacrificial generosity, serve the community, share your story, and celebration. SouthPointe has taught and demonstrated each rhythm throughout its history. The distinction is that *Rooted* provides shared, soul-training experiences to accompany nearly every discipleship rhythm. I will briefly contrast the difference between SouthPointe's application of each rhythm with *Rooted*'s approach to highlight its distinct nature.

SouthPointe has emphasized the importance of daily devotions. Challenges have been issued to spend the first fifteen minutes each day in Scripture in prayer, Bible reading plans have been made available, journals have been given away, and challenges to memorize Scripture have been given, in addition to sermons on the subject.

*Rooted*, however, provides a more intentional focus. Each *Rooted* participant is given a book with weekly homework. Each week consists of a memory verse and five devotions. Each devotion is approximately one to two and a half pages, with Scripture, teaching, response questions, and one or two blank pages for participants to answer each question. The format of the weekly group time is also built around this sharing of one's personal reflections. This format is contrasted to that of the teaching group leader. The leader of each *Rooted* group is to have a heart of a shepherd and approach group time as a facilitator, not a teacher. "A Rooted facilitator has many responsibilities that we will be highlighting in this book, but there is one responsibility you do NOT have, and that is teaching. All of the teaching is left to the written curriculum and to the

Holy Spirit during the weekly group time.”<sup>51</sup> This format transforms what is normally an individual exercise (personal daily devotions) into a shared, soul-training experience.

SouthPointe has attempted to stress the importance of prayer through various means. Individual sermons and whole series have been preached on prayer. The church has prayed without ceasing for twenty-four hours.<sup>52</sup> There were monthly prayer gatherings for about eighteen months. Prayer challenges have been given in which individuals are challenged to follow guided prayer for a set number of days. Books on prayer have been given away. Prayer happens before and during the Sunday services.

But *Rooted* provides a prayer experience beyond what SouthPointe has offered. Each *Rooted* group schedules a separate two-hour prayer experience during week 3 of *Rooted*. This experience is set apart and is not to be one of the ten weekly sessions. Each participant is also highly encouraged to fast the twenty-four hours prior to this prayer experience, unless she or he is medically prevented from doing so. This prayer experience includes both verbalized, corporate prayer and silent, individual prayer. It is followed by a debrief and a shared breaking of the fast. SouthPointe has never challenged people to pray in groups of people with whom they are in relationship, never challenged group leaders to facilitate such an experience, and never challenged fasting as a shared experience.

SouthPointe has also taught and celebrated “the freedom from strongholds” for years. *Rooted* describes this rhythm in following manner: “Sin gives the enemy a stronghold in our lives. Even though all legal claims Satan had against us were canceled when we chose to follow

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51. Mariners Church, *Facilitator Guide* (2011), version 2.0, 5.

52. In those experiences, individuals have signed up for thirty-minute time slots, are given a prayer guide, and pray from their homes.



Christ, our willful indulgence of sins of the flesh is like a chink in our armor.”<sup>53</sup> SouthPointe has taught this through numerous sermons and demonstrated it through the public celebration of freedom in specific people’s lives. I also taught a message called “Confession and Dreams,” where I confessed my sin, insecurities, and struggles, and yet celebrated God’s dreams in the midst of these struggles. Other teachers, worship leaders, and small group leaders have publicly taken similar actions.

But *Rooted* provides a specific, shared, soul-training experience SouthPointe has never offered on a broad scale.<sup>54</sup> *Rooted* participants are to read and personally answer questions about spiritual warfare, sin, and struggle through their participant guide. Week 5’s group discussion is broken into gender-specific smaller groups in which people are offered the opportunity to share their answers.<sup>55</sup> *Rooted* describes this week as pivotal within the whole experience: “Once the freedom that Christ gives has been claimed, we can move into seeking for and living out our purpose in Christ. As you can see, this week has drastic implications on the remainder of the *Rooted* experience and the freedom an individual can feel like living their life with purpose.”<sup>56</sup>

SouthPointe has long taught the importance of serving the community. SouthPointe has reinforced this teaching by serving community organizations such as community health centers, veterans’ agencies, schools, senior citizens’ communities, addiction agencies, and youth- and

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53. *Rooted*, 100.

54. Participants in Celebrate Recovery operate with this very format. Celebrate Recovery participants are the exception to this statement.

55. Facilitators are encouraged to pray throughout out this week and lead by vulnerably sharing their strongholds to set the tone.

56. *Facilitator Guide*, 10.

family-focused organizations from the beginning. The vast majority of these serving opportunities have not happened through small groups. SouthPointe attempted to have home groups serve together, but two logistical challenges prevented these efforts from gaining traction: community organizations were closed during the evenings when groups met, and childcare during group serving events was extremely difficult. Therefore, serving the community has happened, but it has not happened among people in close relationship.

*Rooted* seeks to provide such an experience for each group and may provide a way around the logistical challenges SouthPointe faced. *Rooted* encourages these experiences to be scheduled on the first night of *Rooted*, even though the experience will not happen until week 6. This service experience, like the prayer experience, is to happen outside of the regular group meeting time. The proactive scheduling of these experiences is one of the main responsibilities of the facilitator: “You may want to visit a homeless shelter, serve the military, work with pregnant/parenting teens or battered women. You may know of tutoring needs for underprivileged youth in neighboring communities. You can visit the elderly or provide handyman services in depressed neighborhoods.”<sup>57</sup>

Both SouthPointe and *Rooted* emphasize sacrificial generosity as an element of discipleship. SouthPointe has taught whole series on this topic, made books available for free, and in the spring of 2019, hosted and led financial classes. This is the only rhythm without a shared, soul-training experience, though it is covered in week 8 of the participants’ guide. Facilitators are encouraged to “help people see this isn’t simply a week about giving more money

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57. *Facilitator Guide*, 10.

to the church, but rather living in recognition that all we have has been given as a gift from God . . . For many, dependence on money and greed is a stronghold.”<sup>58</sup>

SouthPointe also holds “celebrating stories” as one of its culture statements, which combines both the sixth (“share your story”) and seventh rhythms (“celebration”) of *Rooted*. SouthPointe has these stories through interviews, live, and on video during Sunday services. These videos have been shared online. Sermons about the importance of sharing one’s story have been taught throughout SouthPointe’s history.

*Rooted* helps participants share their story in more intentional ways than SouthPointe has. First, *Rooted* facilitators are encouraged to bring up the idea of telling one’s stories in the early weeks of *Rooted*. Participants are challenged to think about and pray for the people in their lives with whom they might share their faith story. Second, *Rooted* gives participants practice in sharing one’s story. One or two people are encouraged to briefly share their story with their group each week. Third, *Rooted* provides instructions to help participants formulate their story. Week 9 of the devotions provides specific questions to prompt the writing of one’s story, the platform to answer those questions, and the accountability to share their formulated story with a group of people with whom they are in relationship.

Finally, SouthPointe has taught the importance of celebration, even as recently as a 2019 sermon series covering Old Testament festivals. Stories, growth, and progress have been celebrated at SouthPointe birthday parties, volunteer appreciation celebrations, and on Sundays throughout the history of the church.

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<sup>58</sup>. *Facilitator Guide*, 11.

*Rooted*'s celebration experience is more personal since it happens in the context of more intimate community. It calls for a celebration at the end of the ten-week session. Facilitators are encouraged to lead the whole ten-week journey with this celebration in mind. They are to take personal notes from the group conversations, pray for each participant throughout the ten-week process, pay attention to what God has said through them during the prayer experience, observe each person's heart through the service experience, and notice the affirmations other participants give them. The facilitator will speak a blessing over each person, sharing her or his perception of gifts and calling, and personally praying for them during this final celebration. This effort is more focused than SouthPointe's celebration.

### **Testing the Hypothesis**

*Rooted* provides enough similarities and differences to test my thesis. I anticipate that God will increase the number of baptisms over the ten-week period of *Rooted* from the average ten-week period since 2016. I also expect participants will take steps toward being a compelled disciple by increasing the consistency of daily devotions, time spent serving the community, the number of times one shares her or his story, and sacrificial generosity.

I will conduct this descriptive research through three instruments: pre-test, post-test, and data analysis. First, I will begin with a pre-test questionnaire given to thirty people to assess their current discipleship practices. This anonymous questionnaire will ask participants about the frequency of their daily devotions, the amount of time they have spent in serving the church and community, the number of times they have shared their personal testimony, and their total financial generosity over the last ten weeks. This questionnaire will include the following

demographic information: gender, age range, and time as a Jesus follower, which will provide additional insight.

Second, I will test this same group of thirty SouthPointe people after *Rooted* finishes. *Rooted* participants will be given a revised questionnaire with program-specific and open-ended questions. These questions will test not only the curriculum generally but also the effectiveness of the specific shared, soul-training experiences. Those who did not participate in *Rooted* will be given the same pre-test questionnaire. I will also examine one church-wide point of data: total number of baptisms during the ten weeks of *Rooted*. I will compare this number with the average number of baptisms over a ten-week time during the last four years.

This research will provide quantitative data to explore the outcomes and possible reasons for those outcomes both holistically and within certain demographics. But this hypothesis has one more limitation. This disciple approach is not the only factor of measuring growth, so it will be scientifically impossible to weigh fully *Rooted*'s contribution toward that growth. SouthPointe has experienced numeric growth in 2019.<sup>59</sup> There are five current factors that may have contributed to this growth.

First, SouthPointe appointed a shepherd team<sup>60</sup> in September 2019.<sup>61</sup> This team provides leadership in addition to the staff. Team members focus on protecting the vision, the role of senior leaders, and church unity. Second, SouthPointe purchased its first building in May 2018 and was able to move in February 2019. The building portrays a sense of permanency to the

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59. The average attendance is 289, year-to-date. This is an increase of 22 percent over 2018's average.

60. This is SouthPointe's equivalent to an eldership.

61. This team completed one year of equipping prior to entering this role.

community,<sup>62</sup> reinforces our culture,<sup>63</sup> and provides us a physical space to engage in more discipleship. The effect of the building cannot be measured. Third, SouthPointe led its most concentrated initiative in its history in the spring of 2019. The goal was to improve people's financial discipleship and overall financial health. SouthPointe paused every group and encouraged each person to take Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University video-based class. More than half of SouthPointe's adults finished the course. The average household paid off \$4,848 in debt and saved an additional \$1,940 over the course of eight weeks. My assumption is that the biblical foundations applied will aid in SouthPointe's ability to grow in sacrificial generosity, as well as have greater peace to pursue God through *Rooted*. Fourth, SouthPointe's staff members have reignited efforts to develop leaders within each ministry over the last year. Each staff member increased pastoral care, clarified volunteer and leader roles, sought to improve equipping, and improved processes within her or his ministry. Fifth, SouthPointe added a new student-ministry-focused staff member. His impact has extended beyond students to their families and to volunteers. This project will be limited in its ability to *fully* isolate *Rooted* and the effect of its shared, soul-training exercises.

## Conclusion

The great need for gospel transformation in New England and SouthPointe's growth trend both demonstrate this thesis is worth testing, but there is one more personal motivation. I desire

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62. In a conversation with long-time volunteer Ernie Balasco, he said, "We have always had such a welcoming and loving culture, but that is intangible. But now, we have something tangible to show people that reinforces what this church is about."

63. The goal is consistency: for the design of the building to reinforce SouthPointe's vision and culture, as described earlier in this chapter.

to improve my own disciple-making. Such improvement would have multilayered kingdom effect. The ability to multiply disciples would strengthen my ability to multiply leaders, since discipleship is foundational to leadership development. But most personally, personal disciple-making group would sharpen discipleship efforts with our children, ages nine, six, and four. We have employed few soul-training experiences, to this point. Our discipleship has been limited to transferring knowledge: reading a children's Bible, conversations at the dinner table, and teaching about generosity. My hope is that practicing this discipleship in a church setting will enhance discipling my family, and discipling my family will help me practice discipleship within the church.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGY: THE POWER OF DISCIPLESHIP

#### Introduction

Discipleship is foundational for SouthPointe's original goals of transformation and multiplication. The Holy Spirit transforms individuals through discipleship. It was the process through which Jesus' disciples were transformed, and it is the process through which the Holy Spirit transforms individuals today. Likewise, multiplication is based first on discipleship. Disciples making disciples is the most basic level of multiplication. Churches cannot multiply churches without first making disciples. Small groups cannot multiply more small groups without first making disciples. This could be why there is no New Testament command to multiply churches or groups, but only a command to multiply disciples. Thus, these large multiplication efforts are most fruitful when they are built on disciples multiplying disciples.

Functionally, discipleship leads to multiplication. Several current discipleship resources highlight the functional importance of making disciples.<sup>1</sup> Francis Chan's work, *Letters to the Church*, is one such example. Chan makes the case that house church discipleship functionally gives the church more space. In a section titled "A Case for Churchbnb," he contrasts how Airbnb functions more leanly than the major hotel chains by mobilizing any individual to rent her or his house or even a room of the house. This is more functionally effective: more rooms are available, fewer employees are needed, and there is no need to build even a single facility. Chan

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1. See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006); Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005); or Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).



argues that house churches provide similar benefits, saving the church both energy and finances. This savings could be translated then into greater generosity to the poor and overseas, as well as more focused efforts.<sup>2</sup>

While this may (or may not) be true, the thesis of this chapter is “The real significance of discipleship lies in theology, not in its functionality.” Though theology can narrowly refer to the study of only God the Father, it can more broadly encompass the whole system of Christian thought: the study of Christ, the Spirit, Scripture, sin, salvation, humanity, the church, the second coming, baptism, communion, and prayer.<sup>3</sup>

Theology has three distinct qualities: it is biblical, livable, and systematic.<sup>4</sup> This chapter is based on each of these qualities. First, Scripture is the primary content of theology. This is not to discount the other ways by which one’s theology is formed, such as general revelation,

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2. Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 182-88.

3. These are the specific doctrines elaborated upon in SouthPointe’s doctrinal statement. See SouthPointe Christian Church, “SouthPointe Christian Church Doctrine,” accessed October 17, 2019, <https://www.southpointeri.com/doctrine>.

4. Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2001), 16-17. Erickson includes five distinct qualities of theology. He states that it is biblical, systematic, done in the context of human culture, contemporary, and practical. I am housing his latter three categories under the word “livable.” Theology done in the context of human culture, contemporary, and practical is livable to any person in any setting in any time period.

experiences, and tradition.<sup>5</sup> But Scripture is the foundation for each of these other elements.<sup>6</sup> It is what ties each of these elements into a cohesive whole.

Theology is also livable, because it is comprehensive in nature and comprehensively applies to every aspect of a person's life. Theology touches everything.<sup>7</sup> It is not merely information to be downloaded, but a perspective by which one functions. The purpose of theology, then, is the transformation of everyday life.

Finally, theology is systematic in nature. Theology systematically takes into account all Scripture. Particular Scriptures are quoted, then, because they represent a broader teaching.

This chapter reflects the three characteristics of theology. It is based on Scripture. It is also livable, as its aim is to restate timeless biblical truths in way that is understandable and applicable to people today. Finally, it is also systematic in nature. This chapter is limited in that it cannot exhaustively examine even the most major doctrines in scholarly depth.

Chapter 2, thus, provides a link between SouthPointe's doctrinal beliefs and its ministry practices in its current setting. The goal of this chapter is not only to provide the "what" of theology but also the "why" behind this particular approach to discipleship. This chapter, then, is more practical than just stating doctrinal beliefs, but it is also more theological than just practical

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5. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 18. He mentions four ways to learn about God: general revelation, tradition, experience, and specific revelation (Scripture).

6. Each of the other elements mentioned can be limited in their discipleship effect, if used in isolation. General revelation can provide insight into the existence of God, but when used alone, does not provide details on how to know him. Experiences can contradict other experiences, as well as Scripture. Tradition can provide insight into the past but can fail to transform one's heart. Thus, Scripture is the foundation because it not only ties the rest together but also provides a grid of truth through which experiences and tradition can be measured.

7. Abraham Kuyper, in his inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University, said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" Abraham Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488. Likewise, theology impacts every ounce of a person's existence.

“how-to steps” of ministry.<sup>8</sup> Such an understanding will provide a foundation for SouthPointe’s leaders to make decisions on how to make disciples in its current context.

The three main sections of this chapter are designed to view theology through the lens of discipleship. Beginning with the end in mind, the first section elaborates on a theological vision for both an individual and the collective church. It explores what an individual gospel transformation, as well as the theological foundation for church multiplication. It is the end toward which the final two sections lead. The second and third sections move from broad to narrow. The second section provides the theological foundation for “shared, soul-training experiences.” I argue that this discipleship approach effectively makes disciples, not merely for its functionality, but because it is how every major doctrine is theologically livable. Finally, the third section briefly provides the theological vision for each individual experience within the *Rooted* experience.

### **The Theological Vision of SouthPointe**

SouthPointe’s theological vision applies both to individuals and to the church. This section explores each of these theologically.

#### **Individual Transformation**

Transformed individuals are both humble and bold. While these two qualities are normally mutually exclusive, both are the result of the gospel. The theological foundation for this begins with the love of God and others.

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8. This is not to discount the importance of works that are either strictly theological, nor is it intended to devalue works that are focused on practical application. Rather, I want to distinguish this chapter from these two common categories.

The theological vision for individual gospel transformation starts with Jesus' summary of the Law and Prophets. Responding to the question about the greatest commandment, he stated, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt 22:37-40).<sup>9</sup>

Individual transformation is based on the holistic love of God. The word ἀγαπάω means to love deeply, as it is "to have a warm regard for and interest in another, *cherish, have affection for, love.*"<sup>10</sup> This love is also to be wide, given the expansive nature of "heart, soul, mind, and strength." Likewise, Jesus illustrated the love of one's neighbor as oneself by sharing the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. This neighborly love extends beyond one's physical neighbors. This love should be sacrificial and action-oriented in nature if it is to resemble the Samaritan's love.

What does loving God and others look like? The answer includes external action and internal motivations, according to Jesus.<sup>11</sup> The transformation is not complete without transformation of one's motives. The motivation is one's transformation. Such is the reason

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9. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

10. W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

11. The Sermon on the Mount, in particular, includes external and internal elements: do not murder, but do not hate; do not commit adultery or lust; give, but give without any desire to draw attention to oneself.

Augustine said, “Love, and do as you will.”<sup>12</sup> If love of God and neighbors is one’s motivation, that person will pursue actions that reinforce that love.

The importance of internal transformation is clear through Jesus’ scolding words to the Pharisees in Matthew 23. It is important to realize that the Pharisees demonstrated many of the external actions one associates with discipleship: they knew Scripture, as demonstrated by long phylacteries and long tassels (verses 5-7); they traveled over land and sea to win a single convert (verse 15); they made costly sacrifices (verses 16-22); they tithed (verse 23); they were moral (verse 25); they looked righteous (verse 27-28); they honored past prophets (verse 29).

However, Jesus warned the crowds and his disciples about them. He did not dismiss them completely, for he instructed his listeners, “So you must be careful to do everything they *tell* you” (Matt 23:3). Their external actions may appear fruitful, but he made sure his hearers did not imitate them, for the result is a heavy load (Matt 23:4). Such is in contrast with the load he described: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

What are these leaders lacking? Jesus immediately answered by pointing to their motivation, “Everything they do is done for people to see” (Matt 23:5). Therefore, it is possible for disciples to demonstrate many external and visible qualities: biblical knowledge, prayer,

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12. Jerry Shepherd, “I Once Heard a Preacher Say, ‘Augustine Said, “Love God and Do As You Please,””’ The Recapitulator, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.therecapitulator.com/208/>. Shepherd clarifies Augustine’s statement and notes his purpose of connecting love and motivation: “What Augustine wrote was, in updated English, ‘Love, and do what you will.’ The original does not have the word, ‘God.’ And the Augustine scholars whom I have consulted agree that ‘do what you will,’ better captures Augustine’s thought here than ‘do as you please.’ . . . Augustine says that a person’s actions need to be motivated by love. When such a love-motivated person faces a decision where it could be argued that either of two choices could be seen as being ethically correct, the person’s responsibility in that case is primarily to make sure that the choice eventually made has its underlying motivation in love.”

faithful attendance, tithing, and even disciple making, and yet not fulfill Jesus' theological vision for their lives. Transformation is not less than these external qualities; it is more.

While the importance of gospel motivation is negatively demonstrated by the Pharisees, it is positively described by Paul in Romans. Paul lays a theological foundation that demonstrates how the gospel both motivates internally and transforms externally one's life. Douglas Moo summarizes the livability of Paul's theology: "For . . . Romans, while thoroughly theological and carefully argued, is not a doctrinal treatise. It is Paul's grandest exposition of the gospel. The gospel unleashes God's powers that people, by embracing it, can be rescued from the disastrous effects of sin, being pronounced 'righteous' in God's sight and having a secure hope for salvation from wrath in the last day."<sup>13</sup>

Paul described how such theology is lived in Romans 12:3–15:13. A transformed person recognizes the gifts God has given and humbly uses those gifts to benefit others (Rom 12:3-8). Such a person loves authentically. Here, the ἀγάπη love is described by the ἀνυπόκριτος, which means this love should be "without pretense, *genuine, sincere*."<sup>14</sup> This love is practically demonstrated through devotion to one another, honoring one another above oneself, sharing with one another, rejoicing with those who rejoice, mourning with those who mourn, and doing everything within one's power to live at peace with each person (Rom 12:9-21). This person respects governmental authority (Rom 13:1-7). Externally, the transformed person continues to obey commands (Rom 13:8-10) and does not seek to gratify the flesh (Rom 13:11-14). Finally,

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13. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 744.

14. Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 91.

such transformation even affects how Jesus followers treat people and behave around those who believe and think differently (Rom 14:1–15:13).

These chapters provide an expansive picture of external transformation, but the whole section is built on internal, gospel motivation. Paul started this section with the words “Therefore, . . . in view of God’s mercy” (Rom 12:1). The word “therefore” is a way to look both back and forward. Just as I looked ahead to the external picture of transformation described in Romans 12:3–15:13, so the internal motivation is gained only by looking back. Moo describes this transition as internally resulting in a “transformed worldview”:

In this final main section of the body of the letter, Paul shifts his focus from instruction to exhortation; from ‘indicative’ to ‘imperative.’ Commands are rare in chaps. 1-11. Of course Paul would have been the first to emphasize that all that he teaches in Romans has an eminently ‘practical’ significance, for if we take to heart the truth of the gospel that he has presented, we will have a transformed worldview that cannot but affect our lives in uncounted ways.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the result of loving God and others, internal and external transformation, is a person who demonstrates two qualities that are normally mutually exclusive: humility and boldness. Internally the gospel results both in humility and in boldness.

Andrew Murray describes the importance of humility: “Humility, the place of entire dependence on God, is, from the very nature of things, the first duty and highest virtue of man. It is the root of every virtue.”<sup>16</sup> This is rooted in the gospel, because the gospel eliminates any ground for boasting (Eph 2:9). A humble person recognizes that his sin was so deep and wide

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15. Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 744.

16. Andrew Murray, *Humility* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 10.

that it required a sacrifice of God himself, or as Murray says, “His humility is our salvation. His salvation is our humility”<sup>17</sup>

This humility is not merely a one-time experience upon salvation; it should increase through the life and maturity of a believer. The apostle demonstrated this humility by the manner in which he described himself. In 53-54 AD, he described himself as “least of the apostles” (1 Cor 15:9). Eight years later, Paul viewed himself as the least of all God’s people (Eph 3:8). Finally, at the end of his life, he described himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). The gospel did not transform his attitude merely at his conversion, but throughout his life.

But gospel motivated transformation is also bold in nature. Boldness is “a state of . . . confidence, *courage* . . . *fearlessness*.”<sup>18</sup> This boldness is what the early church prayed for after Peter and John were released from prison (Acts 4:29). This boldness is also rooted in theology. It is not ironic that their prayer began by addressing God as “Sovereign Lord” and then by describing his sovereignty (Acts 4:24-28). Their prayer and behavior were a living demonstration of Jesus’ words when instructing Peter, John, and the other disciples to proclaim the message of the kingdom: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). Jesus, in essence, commands boldness based on the theology of God’s sovereignty and his eternal nature. Such boldness is to be lived.

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17. Murray, *Humility*, 11.

18. Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 781.



The individual transformed by the gospel should be completely humble and unashamedly bold. These internal and external characteristics come only from loving God and neighbor as oneself.

### Collective Transformation

The theological vision for the church<sup>19</sup> is to glorify God by sharing the love of Jesus and making disciples of all people.<sup>20</sup> This vision builds upon the theological vision for individuals. Humble people seek not their own glory but rather the glory of God.<sup>21</sup> Boldness is harnessed to advance the word of God,<sup>22</sup> for individuals who love God seek to glorify him. Thus, people who love others as themselves seek to actively share the love of Jesus. The collective vision for the church lays the groundwork for humble and bold individuals to participate through their unique gifting.

The collective church exists to glorify God. This is not to imply that God does not have inherent glory; he does. “Glory includes splendor, beauty, magnificence, radiance and rapture. In the Bible it is primarily a quality ascribed to God and places of his presence . . . The glory of God is an image of his greatness and transcendence . . . To encounter the glory of God is always

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19. In order to describe SouthPointe’s specific approach, the theology for the collective church should be set first.

20. SouthPointe’s statement of doctrine describes the church: “The Church was founded by Jesus and consists of all Christians everywhere. Every church and every believer has a great commission from Jesus to share his love and make disciples of all people.”

21. One extremely negative example of this is found in Acts 12:23. When Herod was praised by people but did not give glory to God, he immediately died. Contrarily, Peter and John experienced people’s praise, to which each responded by instructing those people to stop doing so (Acts 10:26).

22. Advancing “the word of God” (as well as “the name of Jesus”) is used throughout Acts and is the reason for the boldness of the early church.

awe inspiring and numinous . . . It combines awe and terror, and it simultaneously invites approach and distance.”<sup>23</sup>

To glorify God means to give him his proper weight.<sup>24</sup> It means to put him in his proper place of awe and reverence. It is to recognize this “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6). The picture of glorifying God is demonstrated by the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4 as they fall before him in worship and say, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Rev 4:11).

The act of glorifying God implies involvement in a loving relationship with him. Therefore, it is not meant to dry or necessarily serious, according to C. S. Lewis: “The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is ‘to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.’ But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”<sup>25</sup>

Glorifying God is clearly upward in nature, but God is also glorified through collectively sharing his love and making disciples. In reference to the love of good deeds Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and

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23. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, et al., eds., “Glory,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 330.

24. Kevin DeYoung, “Glory of God: The Weight of Glory,” The Gospel Coalition, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/glory-of-god-the-weight-of-glory/>. “We need to ask more generally, what do ‘glory’ and ‘glorify’ mean? *Kabod* is the Hebrew word for glory; it literally means ‘weight.’ The glory of God is the weight of all that God is, the fullness of his understanding, virtue, and happiness, as Jonathan Edwards put it. We *glorify* God when we throw a spotlight on how great God is. To glorify God is to make much of him—as a mother makes much of her daughter when she fusses and frets over her. To glorify God is to magnify the greatness of his character—not as a microscope magnifies by making small objects look large, but as a telescope magnifies by giving us a glimpse of things that are unimaginably big. To glorify God is to honor his worth.”

25. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1961), 96-97.

put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14-16).

This love is to be shown internally within the church and externally toward the community. Loving “brothers and sisters” is essential if one is to love God (1 John 4:20-21). This love is described by the plethora of “one another” commandments in Scripture (Rom 12:10, 16; 15:17; Gal 5:13; Eph 4:32; Phil 2:3, to name a few). While each such commandment could be elaborated upon in its own section, I will elaborate upon one: loving others by employing one’s spiritual gifts. The purpose is not only to serve the church (1 Pet 4:9) but also to glorify God. Peter wrote, “If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:11). Theologically, the church best glorifies God when each person is using her own gifts.

Externally, the collective church shows both through actions and evangelism. The local church should hold two seemingly mutually exclusive purposes here. They are to show love by selfless action, while also seeking to spread the message of Jesus.

A local church should love the community for the community’s sake. There may be no greater demonstration of this than God’s instructions to the Israelites in Babylonian exile. These Israelites had been brutalized and were driven from their land into this new place. Yet, God commanded, “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer 29:7). God

clarified their purpose during this period: they are to seek the peace and prosperity of this city. They are to pray for it. They are to serve the community for the community's sake.

This is consistent with God's character and instruction throughout Scripture. Micah 6:8 says, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." There is a direct correlation between walking humbly with God and acting justly and loving mercy.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the church reflects God's heart by caring for orphans and widows (Jas 1:27), caring for creation,<sup>27</sup> and loving one's enemies (Matt 5:43-48). Theologically, showing such love glorifies God because it demonstrates his character to the world.

The church also shows God's love to the world through word, by verbally sharing the gospel. Jesus called his disciples to be witnesses in Acts 1:8. A witness is a person who testifies.<sup>28</sup> The early church viewed themselves as witnesses specifically of the resurrection (Acts 2:32; 3:18; 5:32). Witnessing results in "spreading the name of Jesus,"<sup>29</sup> as well as "the word of God"<sup>30</sup> advancing. This ultimately results in God being glorified (Acts 13:48).

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26. Mercy refers to internal motivation, while acting justly refers to external behavior. This total transformation is built on "walking humbly with God."

27. John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 59. Here, Stott writes that "our love of creation should reflect our love of the Creator."

28. Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 619.

29. People were baptized in his name (Acts 2:38), the apostles healed in his name (Acts 3:6), the authorities instructed the apostles not to speak any more in this name (Acts 4:17-18), and the apostles rejoiced for suffering for his name (Acts 5:41).

30. This may be most notable in Acts 8:4, where all Jesus followers, save the apostles, were scattered. But Acts 11:19 notes that the "word" had spread to many places based on their witness.

The church also glorifies God by making disciples. While this whole project is about discipleship, one theological point is to be clarified here. The church is called to make disciples *of Jesus*. While this whole project is on this subject, one point is to be clarified here.<sup>31</sup> Each discipler is to make a disciple of Jesus, not herself or himself.<sup>32</sup> Discipleship, therefore, does not merely need to be a “top-down” effort, nor do discipling relationships need to be confined to only one person discipling another.<sup>33</sup> Rather, discipleship is an effort shared among the church, with every disciple of Jesus contributing to the discipleship of others. Theologically, *Rooted* applies this by calling for “facilitators” rather than “teachers.” These facilitators are not responsible for personally and individually discipling each group member, but rather they are to create environments where discipleship *of Jesus* can happen.

Establishing theological vision for individuals and the collective church is critical in contextualizing the gospel for a particular local church in a certain time and place. The church exists to glorify God. This happens through sharing his love both internally and externally, as well as collectively making disciples of Jesus. This clarity of the theological vision of the church allows a local church, like SouthPointe, to ask questions such as “What method will be utilized to shape people’s attitudes and actions by the gospel? How will participants be involved in the city or community? In what way will SouthPointe catalyze the discovery and use of one’s spiritual gifts? How will the church live ‘one another’ commands, as well as the call to pray and

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31. This may sound obvious, but the opposite of this point is for church leaders or members to make disciples of themselves.

32. Likewise, each church is to make disciples of Jesus, not of itself.

33. This is not to discount such relationships. My point here is that discipleship does not exclusively happen through one-on-one relationships.

demonstrate spiritual disciplines?” These questions and others are to be answered by looking at the theological basis for discipleship experiences. I turn to the theology behind shared, soul-training experiences.

### **Theology: The Foundation for Shared, Soul-Training Experiences**

Shared, soul-training experiences are important not just functionally but also theologically. Theology is the exact reason this method is effective in producing individual and collective transformation. Theology is communicated not only through this method but also by this method.

Each word in the phrase “shared, soul-training experiences” is theologically significant. Every doctrine on SouthPointe’s doctrinal statement can be applied by shared, soul-training experiences. Erickson writes, “The primary purpose of this revelation was not to enlarge the general scope of knowledge. The knowledge *about* was for the purpose of knowledge *of*.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, such discipleship experiences are how theology is lived.

This section expounds on SouthPointe’s doctrinal statement through each element of discipleship: shared, experiences, soul-training. First, it is important that discipleship experiences be shared<sup>35</sup> for three doctrinal reasons. These include the Trinity, God’s purpose for creation, and the nature and impact of sin. Second, three major doctrines demonstrate the significance of experiences as a part of discipleship: the doctrine of the written Word, the incarnation, and

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34. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 52.

35. I am not neglecting the importance of either corporate worship with large group of people, nor am I discounting the importance of individual spiritual disciplines. I am merely focusing on why this particular method is important, theologically.

salvation. In addition to these three major doctrines, the importance of discipleship experiences is reinforced by the practices of baptism and communion. Third and finally, the major doctrines of humanity and the role of the Holy Spirit rest on the soul-training nature of discipleship experiences.

### Shared

Sharing discipleship experiences with others is theologically significant because God is triune and because sharing is foundational in his purpose of creation. Oppositely, sin creates a cycle of isolation.

First, discipleship experiences should be shared because God is triune. The Trinity is that God is one God in three persons. This triune God is eternal in existence. The Trinity is not tritheism, or three gods working in harmony. The doctrine of the Trinity does not teach that God sometimes takes different forms at different times. Rather it is the belief that there “is one God in three persons who know and love another. God is not more fundamentally one than he is three, and he is not more fundamentally three than he is one.”<sup>36</sup>

Though the word “trinity” is not used in Scripture, it is found in many places. I will name two: creation and the baptism of Jesus. The opening pages of Scripture introduce the three persons of the Trinity. The Father is introduced in the opening sentence: “In the beginning, God.” The opening verse pictures the Father as the initiator of creation. The next verse introduces the Spirit: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and

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36. Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2016), 6.

the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen 1:2). Timothy Keller elaborates on the hovering described in this verse: “The Hebrew verb here means ‘flutter’: the Spirit fluttered over the face of the waters. To capture this vivid image, the rabbis translated the passage of the Targums like this: ‘And the earth was without form and empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Sprit of God fluttered above the face of the waters *like a dove*.’”<sup>37</sup> Then God spoke: “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). It is here his Word goes forth. The Word of God, which John used to describe Jesus in John 1:1-14, is introduced.

The same three parties are likewise present at Jesus’ baptism: the Father, who is the voice; the Son, who is the Word; and the Spirit fluttering like a dove. Not only is creation inaugurated by this triune God, but so is salvation and reconciliation through Jesus. This triune God has launched the redemption of this whole world, and indeed, all of creation.

The Trinity, thus, enforces the importance of sharing, because oneness within community is the very nature of the Godhead. That Father, Son, and Spirit have existed forever in community. Humankind is made in the image of God. This theology, thus, is practically lived by sharing discipleship experiences.

Second, reinforcing and building upon the doctrine of the Trinity, is God’s purpose for creation. God created this world, and human beings in particular, for the purpose of sharing in the eternal and selfless love within the Trinity. Clarifying the purpose of creation in general also clarifies the purpose of each individual person. Each person is created to know God, to receive his love, and to share it with others.

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37. Keller, *Jesus the King*, 5.



This purpose of sharing in God's eternal love is elaboration of two theological truths about God: he is love and he is not in need. By describing God *as* love (1 John 4:8), John is stating that love is not merely a characteristic God has, nor is it only a trait that he embodies. No, he *is* love. This love can certainly describe his relationship toward people, but understanding his love toward people is amplified by understanding the loving relationships within the Trinity. Cornelius Plantings elaborates on this: "The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, and refer to one another. . . . Each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others. . . . God's interior life [therefore] overflows with regard for others."<sup>38</sup>

To truly grasp this purpose of creation, one must not only know that God is love but also that he does not need anything. He did not create out of need, not even out of the need for praise or glory. This theological truth is crucial to understanding his purpose of sharing his eternal love with people. Paul elaborated on this as he was reasoning with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks in Athens:

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" (Acts 17:24-28)

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38. Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 20-23.

God's self-sufficiency and his inherent love clarify his purpose in creation.<sup>39</sup> His purpose in creation is to offer this eternal and perfect love to humankind. This clarifies each individual's purpose, as each person is invited to receive this love and share it with others. Such is the second theological reason why sharing discipleship experiences transforms.

Third, the sharing of discipleship experiences is important because it contrasts the isolating nature and isolating impact of sin. Sin isolates, and isolation causes sin. Sin prompted Adam and Eve to isolate themselves from God (Gen 3:8). This hiding was more than just a physical hiding; it was spiritual in nature. It was in isolation in which David's premeditated adultery and subsequent murder of Uriah was birthed. His isolation was more than just physical isolation; it was also spiritual in nature.<sup>40</sup> It is no wonder God stated in creation that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18), for this verse represents also represents a spiritual reality: isolation and sin create a vicious cycle.

In order to understand sin's tie to isolation, sin must be defined. Sin is often described as missing the mark or falling short of a goal.<sup>41</sup> This definition prompts the questions, "What mark is being missed? What goal is unattained? And, why does it isolate?" There are two interrelated and inseparable answers. First, sin is not treating God as God. Second, it is not trusting the character of God. Sin is not giving God his proper weight; sin is not believing God will fulfill his

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39. These doctrines represent both his goodness and his greatness.

40. This reveals a pattern. Isolation causes sin, as it moves people away from their created purpose in sharing God's eternal love. By all indications, he was alone (2 Sam 11:1). His sin was not even instantaneous. He noticed Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2). He first sent to find out about her (2 Sam 11:3), and then sent for her (2 Sam 11:4). It was as if the statement about his physical isolation represented something much deeper. He was alone, and it is not good for man to be alone.

41. William D. Mounce, gen. ed., *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 656.

promises. Sin is not glorifying God; sin is not trusting God. Sin is pride; sin is fear. Pride resists God's greatness; fear doubts God's goodness.

Since this chapter is a personal theology, my personal conviction of sin is relevant. It builds upon sin described in Scripture.<sup>42</sup> I personally was convicted of sin when reading the chapter "The Great Sin" in C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Anyone's theology of sin should include personal conviction, not just intellectual reflection. There is no way to describe my personal understanding of sin without quoting Lewis in depth.

I now come to that part of Christian morals where they differ most sharply from all other morals. There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. . . . There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others . . . it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.<sup>43</sup>

Lewis proceeds to describe how "pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man."<sup>44</sup> By describing pride, Lewis described sin, for pride is the very essence of sin. It is the sin that opens the door to many other sins.

Thus, to understand sin is to understand how it inherently isolates, spiritually and relationally. To understand isolation in this manner is to understand how it reinforces the deep nature of sin. Martin Luther King Jr. described the effect of the cycle of sin and isolation: "Men

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42. This dual nature of sin is witnessed in the Fall. In pride, Adam and Eve believed and then functioned as if they knew more than God, as the serpent's temptation in Genesis 3:5 reveals. Adam and Eve also demonstrated a lack of trust in God's goodness, when it seemed as if he was withholding good fruit that was also delightful to the eyes.

43. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001), 121-22.

44. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 122.

often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they can not communicate; they can not communicate because they are separated."<sup>45</sup>

Spiritual formation must break this cycle of isolation. If isolation is interwoven with sin, then sharing is a critical component in spiritual formation. This is only reinforced both by the nature of the Trinity, as well as the purpose of creation. Returning to the theological vision, this spiritual formation creates both humility and boldness in individuals. Humility puts God in his proper place and is the very antithesis of pride. Likewise, boldness trusts God in all things and is the very antithesis of fear.

### Experiences

The theological vision for both individuals and the church relies not just on sharing but on providing discipleship experiences. The importance of experience lies not just in functionality,<sup>46</sup> but in theology. God is to be experienced, as the very purpose of creation indicates. Lewis described God like this: "In Christianity God is not a static thing . . . but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."<sup>47</sup>

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45. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York, NY: Harper Brothers, 1958). Dr. King spoke at Cornell College; see "Dr. Martin Luther King's Visit to Cornell College," accessed October 19, 2019, <https://news.cornellcollege.edu/dr-martin-luther-kings-visit-to-cornell-college/>.

46. Experience, alongside Scripture, tradition, and reason, shapes one's theology.

47. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174-75.

Experience within discipleship is also important for three theological doctrines and two theological practices. Doctrinally, God is personal, as demonstrated by the nature of his written Word and prayer; the incarnation of Jesus is experiential in nature; and people experience salvation. Additionally, the longtime practices of baptism and communion are, by nature, experiences.

Discipleship should be experienced because of the personal nature and existence of the written Word of God. SouthPointe's statement of doctrine says, "We believe God inspired the Bible and it is entirely true, trustworthy and authoritative for all matters of faith and practice. It is the standard by which we know what to believe and how to live." By inspiring the Bible, God breathed life into Scripture.<sup>48</sup> His written Word is his personal communication. Going beyond mere general revelation, Scripture reveals his character.

Scripture describes itself as an interactive experience by calling itself "alive" and "active." "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:12-13). Scripture, then, is a dynamic experience with a personal God, laying even thoughts and attitudes bare before this God.

The personal interaction with the living God through Scripture is often associated with prayer. Prayer is a personal experience.<sup>49</sup> It is both an invitation (Phil 4:6) and a command (1

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48. I am using the Bible, Scripture, and God's Word interchangeably here.

49. The Psalms, and the wide range of emotions that the psalmists pray, demonstrate the personal nature of God and humans' relationship with him.

Thess 5:17) within Scripture. SouthPointe's doctrinal statement captures this: "God calls us to pray. We have direct access to pray to Him both corporately and individually." Thus, Scripture and prayer are not only both to be experienced. The very existence of both highlights the personal nature of God and his desire for humans to share in his love through experience.

Second, discipleship should be experienced because God's personal nature is demonstrated by the incarnation of Jesus. The name Immanuel, which described Jesus at the incarnation, means "God with us" (Matt 1:23). Likewise, John described the incarnation as "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Humans personally experienced God through the incarnation of Jesus.

The experience went both ways, though. In the incarnation Jesus truly experienced the human experience. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb 2:14-15). The writer of Hebrews continues by saying that Jesus can empathize with people's weakness, because he himself was tempted "in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Heb 4:15).

This is true not only of the incarnation of Jesus, but experience will also be true of his return. The second coming of Jesus will be experienced, as the first coming was. SouthPointe's doctrinal statement says, "After his time on earth, Jesus ascended into Heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father. He will return to earth to judge both the living and the dead." Scripture

pictures this as a comprehensive and universal experience.<sup>50</sup> This experience will be personal in nature, as each person will be judged. Experience, based on the nature of God experiencing humanity, and humanity experiencing God, through the first and second comings of Jesus is thus crucial to the essence of the Christian faith.

Third, it is important discipleship is experienced because of the salvation made possible in Jesus. SouthPointe's doctrinal statement describes salvation as follows:

Jesus was crucified, died and was buried . . . but He rose again bodily from the dead on the third day, thus defeating death and sin. Jesus' death and resurrection guarantees that all people may obtain salvation (forgiveness of sins and eternal life) through their faith in Him. We believe salvation is only through Jesus Christ and that one receives God's grace by believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and putting one's faith in Christ. We respond to God's grace by repenting of sin, confessing Christ and being immersed into Christ.

Salvation is more than a mental exercise or mental assent to some doctrine. It is to experience reconciliation with God rather than isolation from God. Paul made this clear: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Tit 3:3-5).

This salvation experience is built on Jesus' experience of the crucifixion and resurrection. It was through the crucifixion this triune God experienced sin. He who knew no sin became sin (2 Cor 5:21). He not only experienced the penalty for sin that he did not commit, but he also

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50. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 626. "God's purposes encompass all creation. Consequently, the judgment that marks the transition from the old to the new extends to the entire cosmos. Nevertheless, God's activity in the world focuses on humans, for as the perpetrators of the failure we call sin, we are the aspect of creation needing reconciliation. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that humans are the focus of the theological theme of judgment. As Christians we confess that all people, both the living and the dead, will face divine judgment (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5), for humankind, like the cosmos in general, this eschatological event forms the transition from the old to the new creation."

experienced the isolation of sin. His friends abandoned him (Mark 14:50), and he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). The crucifixion was thus more than physical pain. It also was the pain of the breaking of the eternal loving relationship within the Trinity.<sup>51</sup>

Salvation is the experience of moving from isolation from God to reconciliation with God. This is possible only because Jesus was willing to move from the experience of the eternal love of the Trinity to isolation.

Salvation contains both “already” and “not yet” elements. Through salvation, one is already forgiven (Eph 4:32), reconciled (Rom 5:10), made new (2 Cor 5:17), and receives eternal life (John 10:10). There are also elements of salvation which will be experienced later.

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev 21:1-4)

If discipleship is going to transform spiritually, it must be experienced. Experiences are crucial to the theological vision of humility and boldness. Humility is gained by realizing that sin runs so deep that God had to come personally in order to make salvation possible. He would have to experience personally the consequence and isolation of sin in order to reconcile humans. Humility is also gained by personally experiencing the living nature of his word, laying one’s motives and attitudes opens before him. Likewise, each of these doctrines builds boldness. Those who have experienced salvation based on the merit of Jesus can be bold because their salvation is

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51. Keller, *Jesus the King*, 220-21.



not based on personal performance. Boldness is possible not only because of newness in this life, but also through the eternal perspective of Revelation 21. This eternal perspective allows the boldness to face any and every situation.

In addition to these three major theological foundations, there are two other reasons which reinforce the theological importance of shared experience: baptism and communion. Baptism, according to SouthPointe's doctrine, "is given by Jesus as a divine command. Believers are immersed in water as an act of obedience in response to faith in Jesus Christ." It is a physical experience involving water. But it is also a spiritual experience, representing the truths of the gospel. It is an experience that Paul points to as a reminder of salvation (Rom 6:1-4). He instructs readers to remember the spiritual truths of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the salvation one has experienced.

Likewise, communion is a shared experience of the gospel. It is a community of people coming in union to God through the gospel. "Jesus established the Lord's supper as a practice of remembrance whereby believers when meeting together eat and drink the elements as a symbolic reminder of the Jesus' death." Jesus tells his disciples to do this in remembrance of him (1 Cor 11:24) indicating an action they would do together. While there seems to be freedom on the exact expression of communion (manner, mode, frequency), communion is to be a shared experience. These two practices are shared experiences that serve to help people remember the gospel and be transformed by it.

## Soul Training

The theological vision for both individuals and the church relies not just on any shared experiences but on shared experiences that are soul training in nature. Theology is communicated not only through this method but also by this method. The soul-training aspect of this method is theologically important because humans have a soul and the Holy Spirit works to transform people.

First, each human possesses a soul. This is seen both in creation and in salvation. Genesis 2:7 states, “The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”<sup>52</sup> Luke wrote that three thousand souls were added to the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Stanley Grenz describes the importance of the soul within a person:

Above all, the “soul” refers to the human person as the recipient of a special destiny or design in God’s program. . . . “Each person possesses an eternal soul.” We each do indeed “have” an “eternal” soul, in that God desires that each human participate in a destiny which transcends the temporal world for it encompasses all eternity. God has placed within us an “openness to the world,” an eternal longing that he desires to fulfill beyond any temporary experience.<sup>53</sup>

Spiritual transformation does not happen without awareness of the role of the soul. According to Dallas Willard, “What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, not your thoughts, not your intentions, not even your feelings, but your soul. The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens

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52. John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 39-40. This is Dallas Willard’s translation, which Ortberg quotes.

53. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 167.

everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings.”<sup>54</sup>

By integrating the various dimensions of one’s self, Scripture presents a holistic view of human beings.<sup>55</sup> The body is not merely a house for the soul; rather, what affects the body also affects the soul. James states, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your soul” (Jas 1:21).<sup>56</sup> The human soul is impacted by “moral filth and evil.”

The question is, “How can the human soul be shaped to be both humble and bold, to both love God and others?” The answer is through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

SouthPointe’s doctrine describes this process: “God sent the Holy Spirit, who is an active and operative part of the triune God, to indwell every believer. The Holy Spirit fills all believers with His love enabling them to continually become more like Christ (Sanctification). Special spiritual gifts are given to every believer for the good of the Church, and the spread of the Gospel.”

Discipleship is not just about being taught what Jesus commanded, but it is rather about being taught to obey what Jesus said (Matt 28:18-20). This is the role of the Holy Spirit. Jesus equated loving him to keeping the commandments (John 14:15) directly before introducing the Spirit.

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54. Ortberg, *Soul Keeping*, 34.

55. “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). Sanctification happens “through and through” the whole person.

56. This translation is mine. The New International Version translates “soul” as “you.” Though the word “soul” is not explicit, the translation “you” captures the essence of the word “soul.”

Scripture uses botanical imagery to describe the transformation by the Holy Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Paul does not refer to these as mere characteristics.<sup>57</sup> This imagery implies that growth often happens slowly, as opposed to being built instantly. It is also implies that transformation starts internally and moves outward. It begins with the root and ends with the fruit. Cultivation for the purpose of bearing fruit is the work of the Spirit.

While Scripture uses botanical imagery to describe the work of the Spirit, it uses athletic imagery to describe the effort humans are to exert. People can be trained for either godliness (1 Tim 4:7) or greed (1 Pet 2:14). This imagery merely implies humans are to exert effort in spiritual growth. The exertion of effort does not imply that transformation is earned or achieved by people. Rather, training, when viewed properly, is exerting effort to give the Spirit opportunity to cultivate fruit.

Oswald Chambers observes “The Sermon on the Mount is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us.” In other words, no one ever says, “If you want to be a great athlete, go vault eighteen feet, run the mile under four minutes,” or “If you want to be a great musician, play the Beethoven violin concerto.” Instead, we advise the young artist or athlete to enter a certain kind of overall life, one involving deep associations with qualified people as well as rigorously scheduled time, diet, and activity for the mind and body.<sup>58</sup>

The result of the Spirit’s work and humans’ training is a realization of the theological vision. Such people, according to Chambers, are growing to a point where they do not merely

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57. Similar imagery is used in Psalm 1, where the “godly that are like trees that grow near a river.” Similarly, Peter wrote, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23).

58. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999), 8.

have to try to be humble and bold, but that those attitudes are becoming increasingly a part of one's soul. This reinforces that the real significance of discipleship lies in its theology, not merely its functionality, which is why transformation happens through "shared, soul-training experiences." Each experience within *Rooted* provides a unique benefit for this transformation.

### **Theology: The Foundation for Each *Rooted* Experience**

Finally, and most narrowly, each shared, soul-training experience of *Rooted* contributes toward the described theological vision, as well as reinforcing theology demonstrated by shared, soul-training experiences. Each *Rooted* experience thus provides a theological experience. Each demonstrates the livability of theology. There are seven such experiences: daily devotions, the prayer experience, the "freedom from strongholds" discussion, the serve experience, sharing and hearing testimonies, the speaking of blessing, and the celebration experience. This section details the ways each experience contributes, according to Scripture, toward the theological vision.

Daily devotions are one of the most foundational experiences of *Rooted*. These daily devotions consist of several elements: Scripture, the relation of Scripture to life, life-reflection questions, and prayer prompts. There are also weekly memory verses. These daily devotions are reflected upon alone, but the personal reflections and prayers are meant to prepare one for the weekly group discussion. They are part of a together experience.

The experience of daily devotions specifically contributes toward loving God holistically and helping others do so. Moses tied the love of God to the daily interaction with Scripture: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your

children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deut 6:5-9).

Theologically, loving God in this manner is the foundation for all transformation.

*Rooted* includes a special and unique prayer experience, with the encouragement for group members to also fast. This experience often includes prayer stations, prayer prompts, Scripture reflections, and group prayer. This experience includes joint fasting and the shared experience of breaking the fast, for many.

The early church demonstrated the importance of praying and fasting together. They specifically employed these joint experiences in setting apart people for leadership. It was during communal prayer and fasting that the Holy Spirit prompted the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas for the work to which he called them (Acts 13:2). Paul and Barnabas then, with prayer and fasting, appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23). *Rooted*, likewise, not only provides an experience of prayer and fasting but also emphasize the importance of being world changers. Taking the gospel to one’s spheres of influence, prayer and fasting plays an integral role in the theological vision of glorifying God through showing love and making disciples.

The *Rooted* curriculum also includes a “freedom from strongholds” focus. “At times we may, consciously or not, allow our adversary to have authority or position in our lives. The Scriptures call these ‘strongholds’ or ‘footholds.’”<sup>59</sup> Participants are to “prayerfully review the list of strongholds and corresponding behaviors,”<sup>60</sup> as well as accompanying Scriptures and the

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59. *Rooted*, 100.

60. *Rooted*, 102-5.

spiritual “freedoms” that represent the opposite of the stronghold. Then, at the weekly group meeting, participants break into gender-specific groups where participants share the specifics about their lives in a confidential setting. Prayer for each individual follows.

This type of experience leads to healing, according to James. “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16). The word for healing is often used of physical healing (Matt 8:8, 13; 15:28), but Peter also uses it to refer to the healing that happens through the wounds of Jesus. “‘He himself bore our sins in his body’ on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed’” (1 Pet 2:24). Theologically, this is a step away from the isolating nature of sin and toward the healing of redemption.

*Rooted* also includes a serve experience. Groups may choose to serve community members in need or an organization that meets needs in their local community. It is here that groups may serve orphans and widows, the elderly, or the needy.

This shared experience is the practical application of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:13-14). This experience, thus, contributes toward the theological vision of selflessness, as individuals are transformed by the gospel.

*Rooted* participants also “share their story” throughout the group experience. Through the ten weeks, each person is encouraged to share the three-to-five-minute version of their life story with the group. They are also encouraged to pray for an opportunity to share their story with

someone outside of group throughout the ten weeks. For those who already possess faith in Jesus, their story is to focus on “what I was before Jesus, how I met Jesus, and what I’m like after.”<sup>61</sup>

The experience of telling and hearing testimonies helps the church overcome spiritual warfare. In his chapter on the red dragon, John writes about the people who overcame his power: “They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Rev 12:11). Theologically, the sharing of stories, then, also helps participants break strongholds.

The sixth shared, soul-training experience from *Rooted* is the experience of blessing. The facilitator speaks a blessing into each person’s life during the final *Rooted* group gathering.<sup>62</sup> In the final group gathering of the ten weeks, the facilitator will speak into each person’s life with a blessing. The content of these words will come from observations from conversations, growth, serving experiences, and the sharing of one’s story.

The experience of blessing provides several blessings: clarification on one’s giftedness, the infusing of courage, and potentially, freedom from a stronghold.<sup>63</sup> “Blessing presupposes a benefactor and a recipient, and not infrequently there is a mediator who pronounces or confers

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61. *Rooted*, 188, 193. It asks “before you came to Christ” questions such as, “What was your lifestyle like?” “How did you deal with challenges, setbacks, and crises?” and “How did you satisfy your inner needs?” It also calls participants to write out their “after Christ” story by answering questions such as, “How has Christ made a difference in your life?” “How have your thoughts, attitudes, and emotions changed?” and “What has changed in your relationship with others?”

62. This is not the final *Rooted* experience, however. The final *Rooted* experience takes place with all *Rooted* groups of the church.

63. Though there are many blessings in Scripture, I could not find a passage which specified a theological benefit of blessing. Rather, the benefits were implied and multifaceted in nature.



the prospect of blessing from God to a human recipient. In the Bible, blessing is ultimately from God, though people often pronounce a wish for blessing on fellow humans.”<sup>64</sup> The Bible includes many examples of blessing. Jacob is one such example. After he was blessed in Genesis 32:29, he clearly became more humble. Thus, the experience of blessing can provide a number of spiritual benefits that result in either the humility or boldness of theological vision.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the seventh shared, soul-training experience is the experience of celebration. The *Rooted* celebration experience is a shared experience, not only with one’s particular *Rooted* group but with all *Rooted* groups of a particular church. This celebration includes the sharing of stories, baptisms, and worship.

Celebration leads to gospel transformation by reminding participants of God’s goodness and his greatness. The commanded celebrations in Exodus 23 and Leviticus 23 draw participants back to the reality that God was both powerful enough and loving enough to deliver them.<sup>66</sup> Celebrations, then, not only reinforce theology but also provide a way in which such theology can be lived. Weaving in regular celebrations allows participants to remember the past,<sup>67</sup> which catalyzes boldness and clarifies purpose in the present and future.

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64. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, et al., eds., “Blessing, Blessedness,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 98.

65. Like the gospel itself, blessing can unleash both humility and boldness. Mary was blessed by the angel. Her ensuing song drew out words such as “the humble state of your servant,” as well as the bold realization that this God “has brought down rulers from their thrones” (Luke 1:46-52).

66. “Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt” (Ex 23:15). They are to celebrate as they remember God’s powerful deliverance.

67. Remembering is repeated command in Scripture as a way to impact the present. Jesus’ instruction to remember the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand was to aid the disciples in a deeper understanding of guarding against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 16:9-11).

The shared, soul-training experiences provided by *Rooted* each have a theological foundation. Each directly contributes toward the theological vision. Each contributes toward an environment that allows the Holy Spirit to cultivate fruit as participants exert grace-motivated effort.

## Conclusion

When Jesus commanded his disciples to make more disciples, he clarified where they were to direct their energy and attention: “teaching them [future disciples] to obey everything I have commanded you.” Discipleship, then, is the process through which disciples are not merely taught what Jesus commanded, but they are taught to obey. Such obedience is the result of a heart and soul that have been both humbled by the gospel and emboldened by it. This humility and boldness are the result of theology and continued contemplation of it, according to C. H. Spurgeon.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity, so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with, then we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbs-line cannot sound its depth, and our eagle eye cannot see its height, we can turn away with the thought that the vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass’s colt; and with solemn exclamation, “I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.” No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than the thought of God. But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it . . . Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.<sup>68</sup>

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68. C. H. Spurgeon quoted in *Rooted*, 16-17.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FOUNDATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

#### Introduction

The first two chapters have established a problem in the average American church and proposed a lack of discipleship as the main reason for plateau and decline. I have proposed that, though discipleship efforts have been made, such efforts are often lacking. Based on the nature and practice of theology, discipleship efforts should include shared experiences and shape one's soul. Therefore, SouthPointe Christian Church has initiated a discipleship curriculum called *Rooted*.

This discussion of discipleship does not occur in a vacuum. There are countless resources. This chapter explores such resources that answer the questions, “Who are the main voices in discipleship today?” and “How does *Rooted* compare and contrast with each resource?” The works of five contemporary authors are evaluated next to *Rooted*. Each author describes how the church is to make disciples. The books of the first two authors, James Bryan Smith and Jim Putman, are applied within a church like SouthPointe. Mike Breen's work is directed toward making disciples in missional communities. Francis Chan and Neil Cole write about making disciples within house churches.

I have personal experience with the works of Smith, Putman, and Breen, but I have only read (and re-read) Chan and Cole. I have led our staff through all of Smith's works, along with a small group of SouthPointers through his first two books. I also led a small group of leaders through Putman's individual training manual at SouthPointe's sister church, NorthPointe, prior to

SouthPointe's launch. In addition, prior to SouthPointe's launch, the original launch team of SouthPointe went to Putman's church for a training called Immersion. I have read two of Breen's books. Our staff, early in our existence, focused heavily on the first chapter of Breen's *Building a Discipling Culture*.<sup>1</sup> Then, I was assigned *Multiplying Missional Leaders* for a resources review during a residency through this doctor of ministry program.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I have read and re-read the works by Chan and Cole, but I have no further personal experience with them. This chapter offers a thesis and compares and contrasts *Rooted* with each leading voice.

Based on my interaction and experience with each, *Rooted* provides the most clear, holistic, accessible, implementable, and foundational discipleship resource, though each of these resources highlights a weakness.

Therefore, my evaluation of each resource includes three main subsections: an overview, the similarities with *Rooted*, and the differences with *Rooted*. The overview of each resource includes the author's background and credentials, the question the author aims to answer, and how the author answers the question, as well as a description of other, similar resources by each author. The similarities subsection of each will be very brief, since every resource has several common threads of discipleship. However, I comment on common threads that are nearly verbatim in *Rooted* material. The final subsection, on differences, highlights not only a difference between the particular resources but also identifies a strength of the *Rooted* material, as well as a

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1. Mike Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimensions Ministries, 2012), Kindle.

2. Mike Breen and Steve Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Making Disciples Like Jesus Did*, 2nd ed. (Pawleys Island: SC, 3 Dimensions Ministries, 2012), Kindle.

weakness it exposes within the *Rooted* material. Exposing such weaknesses will allow SouthPointe's leaders to address those areas through different means.

I conclude this chapter with my evaluation of the *Rooted* material over and against the other resources mentioned and then describe what my project will add to the contemporary conversation on discipleship.

### **James Bryan Smith**

James Bryan Smith has been personally influenced by several well-known Christian leaders and sees these relationships as his qualification to write. He compares himself with Forrest Gump in this respect: "Forrest . . . is an ordinary—somewhat challenged—man whose life is nothing special except that he has a good heart. Along the way, this 'nobody' meets a lot of 'somebodies.'"<sup>3</sup> Smith came from a Christmas-and-Easter-only Methodist family and became a Christ follower in his senior year of high school. Both his academics and interests were average.<sup>4</sup>

His first influence was Richard Foster, whom he met when he attended Friends University. Unbeknownst to Smith, Foster had written one of the most influential Christian books of the last century: *Celebration of Disciplines*. Foster mentored Smith and even communicated to a mutual friend that Smith was the answer to his prayer for a student in whom he could invest his life. Richard also connected him to his second major influence, Henri

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3. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 10. His interests included sports, pretty girls, and Jesus—in that order. Academically, he graduated 300th out of a class of 600.

4. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 10. "Years later a mutual friend told me that Richard had been praying for a student to come along in whom he could invest his life and wisdom, and that apparently, not long after meeting me, he told this friend I was the one God had chosen for this Paul-and-Timothy-like mentoring."

Nouwen, the great spiritual writer. Henri encouraged Smith to attend Yale Divinity School, where James met his wife.

Smith took a job teaching alongside Richard in the religion department at Friends University a few years later. He met his third major influence during this season, as Rich Mullins was a student in his class. Smith described the experience of having Mullins, who went on to write and record “Awesome God” and “Step by Step,” in class, “Having Rich in a class about God was like having Einstein your math class—I was intimidated. But we became close friends, and eventually he lived in the attic apartment of our home for a little over two years.”<sup>5</sup> Rich introduced him to Brennan Manning (author of *Ragamuffin Gospel*), who became a friend and mentor. Smith describes Manning as the person who taught him most about the love of God.<sup>6</sup>

Smith then met Dallas Willard, professor of philosophy at University of Southern California and author of *The Divine Conspiracy*, through Richard Foster. About Willard, Smith writes, “I have never known anyone as brilliant as Dallas. He, like Richard, is a true disciple of Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> Willard invited Smith to co-teach a class with him at Fuller Seminary in the doctor of ministry program, which Smith accepted. They co-taught this class together for eight hours a day for two weeks each summer.

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5. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 11.

6. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 11.

7. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 12.

Dallas Willard believed that someone should create a “curriculum for Christlikeness” for individuals and churches and then encouraged Smith to write it.<sup>8</sup> Smith thus developed a three-book curriculum in response to the question, “How do churches teach people to become like Jesus?” Those books are *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*; *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*;<sup>9</sup> and *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love*.<sup>10</sup> But he credits these words to the culmination of his mentors’ influence.<sup>11</sup>

These books provide a recipe on how people change: “I believe there is a reliable method of changing our hearts. It is not complicated, nor is it difficult. It does not rely on willpower.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, people cannot change merely by desiring to change. Rather, “we change indirectly. We do what we can in order to enable us to do what we can’t do directly. . . . If we can change those things—and we can—then change will come naturally to us.”<sup>13</sup>

Change, according to Smith, is reliant on the Holy Spirit using three elements. “We have to examine what we think (our narratives) and how we practice (the spiritual disciplines) and

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8. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 23. Willard said a blueprint for such a curriculum can be found in the ninth chapter of his great book *The Divine Conspiracy*.

9. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

10. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010).

11. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 12. “Some of the finest teachers have poured their lives and teaching into me, a nobody from nowhere, and I am most blessed . . . This book is the culmination of twenty-five years of learning from these great men.”

12. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 23.

13. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 23.

who we are interacting with (our social context).”<sup>14</sup> His trilogy is organized around this understanding and is designed to be used in the context of community. Each book has eight to twelve chapters. Each chapter addresses one’s narratives and is followed with a one- to three-page “soul-training” exercise, or practices to produce change. These soul-training exercises should be completed by individuals throughout the week, in between group meetings. There are also discussion questions for group settings, which guide the interaction in a social context. Smith recommends each group meeting to begin with five minutes of silence, followed by fifteen to twenty minutes discussing the previous week’s soul-training exercise and twenty-five to forty minutes discussing the previous chapter.

Smith encourages participants to commit to the following actions: prepare, by writing answers and soul-training reflections in a journal; read the chapter without hurry; complete each weekly soul-training exercise; reflect in order to clarify thoughts and crystallize what God is teaching; interact by preparing to listen and share in each group meeting; and encourage other groups members by emailing at least two group members between group meetings.<sup>15</sup>

#### Similarities with *Rooted*

There are many similarities between *Rooted* and Smith’s trilogy. *Rooted* provides a list of potential resources for groups to cover, if they decide to continue meeting after the initial ten-week *Rooted* curriculum. Smith’s trilogy is on the list of recommended resources. The unique similarity between these two resources, in contrast to the other resources in this chapter, is the

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14. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 23.

15. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, 21-22.



approach. Both provide a curriculum for individuals to work through between group meetings and base the group meeting discussion on that material.

### Differences with *Rooted*

Smith's material, even with an abundant number of similarities, has one main difference: the number and focus of soul-training exercises. Smith provides thirty-three different soul-training experiences through the year. Each exercise focuses on one's relationship with God, self, and others. This difference exposes both a strength and a weakness within the *Rooted* material.

This difference positively highlights a strength of *Rooted*: clarity. By providing only seven rhythms, *Rooted* clearly defines a disciple of Jesus. In the last chapter of the trilogy, Smith encourages participants to customize a personal soul-training plan. Participants are to select the most impactful soul-training exercises and to incorporate those exercises into their lives. Negatively, this approach relies on self-awareness and feeling. One could embrace the exercises for them, while avoiding what is difficult. *Rooted*, by establishing seven rhythms, does not allow such wiggle room.

Smith's work exposes a weakness within *Rooted*: its lack of focus on the Sabbath and related soul-training exercises. Smith's approach includes silence at the beginning of each meeting, and related soul-training exercises such as a technology fast, silence, solitude, and a literal Sabbath. These related disciplines provide a necessary approach to life, faith, and even the seven rhythms of *Rooted*. Neither daily devotions nor prayer can be hurried, which the Sabbath guards against. Keeping the Sabbath also contributes toward freedom from strongholds, while busyness often exacerbates strongholds. The Sabbath focuses people on the idea of being rather

than mere doing, and thus it provides a foundation for serving the community in a healthy manner. The Sabbath lifestyle teaches people that their true value lies not in what they produce, which frees people to be sacrificially generous. The Sabbath provides clarity to help one crystallize one's own story, which prepares people to share it more readily and effectively. Finally, the Sabbath is itself a regular celebration.

### **Jim Putman**

Jim Putman is a leading voice in discipleship due to the approach and numeric success of the church he founded, Real-Life Ministries (RLM), in Post Falls, Idaho. RLM moved into a 25,000-square-foot building when it was two years old. Within six weeks the church had grown from 850 to 1,600 people. After a year, Real-Life Ministries was home to 2,300 people in five weekend services.<sup>16</sup> Through eight years, they had grown to 8,500, witnessed more than 4,000 baptisms and conversions, have more than 7,000 in small groups, have released several members as international missionaries, and have started six new churches with thousands in attendance. Putman summarizes their success: "The little band that started out so small in the corner of Idaho is now training churches all over the world."<sup>17</sup>

While this success is not altogether unique for the American church today, their approach is unique. Through his ministry, Putman, a former wrestling coach, seeks to answer the question, "How does the church win?" He finds the answer in relational discipleship: "Winning is making

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16. Jim Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport: A Championship Strategy for Doing Ministry Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2008), Kindle edition, 30-31.

17. Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), Kindle edition, locations 86-87.

disciples—converts who are disciplined onto God’s team and taught to take part in Christ’s mission. Numbers don’t mean much unless you are counting the number of people being transformed by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup>

Putman has written or co-written widely on the topic of discipleship. His works include *Church is a Team Sport: A Championship Strategy for Doing Ministry Together*; *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches that Make Disciples*; *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*. He also co-authored *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual: Equipping Disciples who Make Disciples*.<sup>19</sup> Summarizing his writing, Putman believes four important elements of discipleship are missing in average churches: a consistent definition of disciple and discipleship, a reproducible discipleship process, a relational environment, and the identification and training of leaders.

First, Putman highlights the importance of churches possessing a consistent definition of discipleship.<sup>20</sup> RLM gains its own definition of “disciple” from Jesus’ discipleship invitation of Peter and Andrew enter discipleship” “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). Real-Life identifies three characteristics of a disciple. First, a disciple knows and follows Christ, as indicated by the words “Come, follow me.” Second, based on the words

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18. Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport*, 70.

19. Jim Putman, Avery T. Willis Jr., Brandon Guindon, and Bill Krause, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual: Equipping Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

20. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 176-79. “This problem is not unique to the church I just told you about. At Real Life, we do a monthly training with churches around the world. We often have church teams sit together, and then we ask each person to write his or her definition of a disciple without talking to the other teammates. In all our years of doing this, we have encountered only two churches in which the entire staff defined discipleship using the same terms. Even though many agree that the mission of the church is to make disciples, they don’t agree on what a disciple is and they don’t use the same language.”

“and I will make you,” a disciple is being changed by Christ. Third, a disciple is committed to the mission of Christ, as indicated by the phrase “fishers of men.”<sup>21</sup>

Second, a reproducible discipleship process is significant, according to Putman. RLM’s process centers on four actions: share, connect, minister, and disciple. This process, known as SCMD, provides a common language for discipleship. “This process helps people think in terms of what to *do*, not just what to *know*. This process helps disciple-makers be intentional as they lead others through stages of spiritual growth.”<sup>22</sup>

These four actions correspond to the four different stages of spiritual maturity that Real-Life Ministries recognizes. The “spiritually dead and spiritual infants” are characterized by unbelief; “spiritual children” are marked by their selfishness, “spiritual young adults” are identified by service; and “spiritual parents” are characterized by their intentionality. Therefore, in order to disciple an unbeliever, one must share the gospel, and to disciple a spiritual child, one must share “your life, new truth, new habits.”<sup>23</sup> This sharing represents the “S” in their discipleship process. One discipless a spiritual child by connecting them to God to a small group and purpose. Spiritual young adults are discipled by training them to minister by equipping them for ministry, providing ministry opportunities, and releasing them to do ministry. Finally, a spiritual parent is released to be a disciple maker. A person of that level of spiritual maturity can explain the discipleship process and is released to disciple others.<sup>24</sup>

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21. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 185-230.

22. Putman, Willis, Guindon, and Krause, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual*, 112.

23. Putman, Willis, Guindon, and Krause, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual*, 111.

24. Putman, Willis, Guindon, and Krause, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual*, 111.

Putman describes the importance of a clear and reproducible process. “I want to explain the process we use to teach every believer in our congregation how to be a disciple who discipless others. This process gives our people a way to clearly see where they are on their own discipleship journey, and it helps our leadership team clearly see if we are effectively training disciples who can disciple others.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, his writing seeks to teach readers how RLM seeks “to make our church a place where real relationships, real authenticity, real teaching, and thus real discipleship can happen.”<sup>26</sup>

Third, the environment is important to a church’s discipleship success. Specifically, environments need to be relational. The clearest picture of what is meant by “relational environment” may be RLM’s approach to the content of their small groups. They employ a relational way of learning Scripture, called “storying.” Their leaders provide biblical texts for small group leaders. Storying involves four steps. First, the small group leaders assign someone in the group to learn the story, in order that the assigned storyteller can tell the particular biblical story in a conversational manner, in her or his own words, without reading it, but while staying true to its meaning. The other members of the small group are reading along during this telling of the story, in order to determine if the storyteller missed anything. Second, the leader asks the group if any detail is missed and then “rebuilds” the story with the included details. Third, the leader asks another group member to retell the story without reading it. Finally, after the story has been told, rebuilt, and retold, the leader asks questions to highlight truths within the Scripture. Such questions include: What new thing did you discover in the story that you did not

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25. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 68-70.

26. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 65-66.

know before? What did you learn about God? What did you learn about people? Which person is most like you in the story? What will you take away from this discussion? What will you do with what you have learned?<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the importance of common language, a reproducible process, and a relational environment, Putman emphasizes the significance of training leaders. “At Real Life, targeting and training leaders is a very important part of the process, even more so than the curriculum.”<sup>28</sup> The *Real Life Ministries Training Manual* was written to aid in this training. It is a fill-in-the-blank workbook, made up of twelve weeks, with each week divided into five days. This book can be used in a small group setting, which is recommended to be three to ten people. Each day requires twenty to thirty minutes to do the assignments. In essence, this workbook helps people personally apply their discipleship process by answering questions about their own life.

#### Similarities with *Rooted*

The greatest unique similarity between *Rooted* and Putman’s resources is the availability of a five-day-per-week curriculum.

#### Differences with *Rooted*

Real-Life Ministries’ approach exposes both a strength and weakness of *Rooted*. *Rooted* provides a more holistic picture of discipleship. The vast majority of RLM’s focus is on making disciples, but it lacks substance on other areas of discipleship. For example, while its

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27. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 1562-71.

28. Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, locations 1554-55.

reproducible process instructs disciple makers to share new habits, *Rooted* defines those habits. In *Rooted*, one is not left to guess as to what new habits, or rhythms, should be shared because they are clearly defined.

Real-Life Ministries also exposes a weakness of the *Rooted* material: namely, what happens after the completion of *Rooted*'s ten-week curriculum. The *Rooted* material effectively and systematically teaches Scripture. It even emphasizes memorizing Scripture. However, it does not effectively train people to understand Scripture on their own, especially upon the conclusion of the ten weeks. It teaches *what* but it fails to teach *how*. This is important so that people are not relying on a curriculum or a devotion written by humans in order to interact with God. Storying, as proposed by RLM, is an example of potential remedy for this weakness.<sup>29</sup>

### **Mike Breen**

Mike Breen's development of missional communities in Sheffield, England, makes him a leading voice in discipleship today. His success, however, was not immediate. Mike and his wife, Sally, moved to Brixton Hill, one of the poorest inner-city neighborhoods in London, right out of college. They surveyed the residents in order to discover the best way to serve the community and began by helping clean up a common concern, the neighborhood's litter problem. This influenced their community, as scores of people were coming to faith, the quality of life increased, and they saw things "happen that you only read about in Acts 2. I had never seen anything like it. The Kingdom of God was colliding into earth. The future was coming into the

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29. From my perspective of using this method through SouthPointe's first two years, storying is not without its own weakness: it is difficult to apply this approach to non-narrative portions of Scripture.

present.”<sup>30</sup> However, years later, there is very little fruit of their work. “If you go to Brixton Hill, there’s very little evidence we were ever there.”<sup>31</sup>

Ten years later, Mike and Sally took on the role of senior leadership at a vibrant church in northern England called St. Thomas. It was located in Sheffield, a dried-up old mill town where only 2 percent of people went to church. Based on newly discovered leadership principles, they employed an approach they called missional communities. Breen describes this approach: “These were groups of people, about the size of an extended family (20-50 people), who were bound together in community by their mission and were incarnating the Gospel of Jesus in every crack and crevice of society . . . were laity-led, and the leaders decided what their vision was and how the Lord was asking them to be the church to the places he was sending them.”<sup>32</sup>

Hundreds of people came to faith through this approach. The number of such communities doubled three times in a few years, which led to St. Thomas becoming one of the largest churches in England.<sup>33</sup>

Though revival was happening, Mike and Sally felt called to leave. However, the growth continued. St. Thomas had doubled in size seven years after their departure and is one of the largest churches in all of Europe. In addition to the thousands who have now come to faith through this approach, a movement has spread throughout the whole continent. The success was also qualitative:

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30. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 185.

31. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 185.

32. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 192.

33. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 192.



The city council, which has always been hostile to Christians and which has done everything it could to make life miserable for believers, started giving out grants to the Missional Communities working with teenagers . . . the council found that they were pretty much the only things in the city that were able to positively deal with the crime, poverty, and apathy found among most of the teenagers in the city.<sup>34</sup>

The foundation for Breen's movement is discipleship. "If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples."<sup>35</sup> The focus should be on making disciples, people who live as Jesus would live if he were that person.<sup>36</sup> He believes "discipleship is not only the boot camp that trains them for the front lines, but also the hospital where they recuperate when they get wounded and the off-duty time they need to rest."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, he believes every church should ask itself foundational questions about discipleship. "I've heard Dallas Willard say that every church should be able to answer two questions: First, what is our plan for making disciples? Second, does our plan work?"<sup>38</sup>

Breen has written two influential works on discipleship: *Building a Discipling Culture* and its sequel, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*. These two works provide a substantial voice to the discipleship conversation today. His missional communities of twenty to fifty must have a culture of discipleship, which he describes as possessing three characteristics: "1) A discipleship

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34. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 207.

35. Breen and Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture*, location 95.

36. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 386.

37. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 425.

38. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 387.

vehicle (we call it a Huddle) 2) People need access to your life (discipleship can't be done at a distance) 3) A discipling language (our discipling language is called LifeShapes).”<sup>39</sup>

Breen elaborates on the need for a discipling language, claiming that language shapes culture.<sup>40</sup> He created a discipleship language and a system of reference involving shapes:

A semicircle, a circle, a triangle, a square, a pentagon, a hexagon, a heptagon, and an octagon. Each side of each shape has its own meaning. For example, the circle is about how disciples are to see, the three sides of the triangle teach about deeper and balanced relationships, the four sides of the square represent four truths about multiplying disciples, the five sides of the pentagon describes five possible personal callings, the six sides of the hexagon describe six truths about prayer, the seven sides of the heptagon teach about communal life and health, and the octagon describes mission through persons of peace.<sup>41</sup> Each chapter in the second section of *Building a Disciple Culture* is dedicated to a different shape.

### Similarities with *Rooted*

The assessment of the current discipleship problem is the greatest similarity Breen's resources share with *Rooted*.

We have taught people far beyond their obedience levels. They don't need more information. They actually need to do what scripture says to do! Jeff Vanderstelt put it this way: Often when I speak to leaders and people who wish we did more Bible studies at (our church community), I ask them what was the last book of the Bible they studied. Let's say they've respond with "James." I then say something like, "That's great! I'm

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39. Breen and Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture*, location 535.

40. Breen and Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture*, location 630.

41. Breen and Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture*, locations 592-733.

sure you're now caring for widows and orphans, visiting the sick, caring for the poor, etc.!" To which I generally hear, "Well no . . . not really." Then, I say, "But I thought you studied James?" "Well, yes, but I'm not necessarily doing that."<sup>42</sup>

Breen quotes another friend, Alex Absalom: "The problem with Christians isn't that they don't understand what Jesus said. The problem with Christians is that they don't do what Jesus said."<sup>43</sup> Breen's summary at the end of chapter 2 reflects my summary of the Great Commission. Jesus did not merely instruct disciple makers to teach what he command, but they are to teach disciples *to obey* what he commanded.

#### Differences with *Rooted*

Breen's work highlights a strength and exposes a potential weakness within *Rooted*. When contrasting these two approaches, *Rooted* is more accessible. While Breen's disciple language might work in his context, the expectation to remember the forty to fifty terms represented by the shapes themselves and all of their sides is complicated. *Rooted* employs the main elements more simply and succinctly.

*Rooted*'s weakness that Breen's work exposes is *Rooted*'s lack of equipping for individuals to individually make disciples. He states his conviction strongly: "IF THERE'S ANYTHING ANY OF US SHOULD BECOME GREAT AT, IT'S MAKING DISCIPLES WHO CAN MAKE DISCIPLES."<sup>44</sup> *Rooted* emphasizes making disciples in community much more

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42. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 577.

43. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 581.

44. Breen and Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture*, location 528.

than individuals making individual disciples. This exposed weakness is, at the least, a topic for SouthPointe's leaders to pray about and discuss.

### **Francis Chan**

Francis Chan has been a leading voice in the American church for over a decade. Initially, he received notoriety for his founding and developing a megachurch, but now his leadership is concentrated in developing a house church movement. Chan planted Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley, California, when he was twenty-six years old. He had three goals when he founded this new work: "First, I wanted all of us to sing directly to God. And I mean really sing . . . Singing with reverence and emotion. Singing as though God is really listening to their voices? That is a powerful experience, and I wanted it to be central to our new church."<sup>45</sup> Second, he wanted people to hear the Word of God, even the passages that contradicted one's logic and desires.<sup>46</sup> Third, he wanted members to live holy lives. "I had seen too many Christians packed into too many churches who seemed to have no interest in actually doing what the Bible said. I could not get past the irony of this. These people would come back week after week to hear from a Book that demands that they 'be doers of the word, and not hearers only' (James 1:22), but they never seem to do anything."<sup>47</sup>

Cornerstone met in a local middle-school cafeteria, outgrew it, and then moved into a converted former liquor store. They bought their own building after outgrowing that space. Then

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45. Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 11.

46. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 12.

47. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 12.

the building had to undergo a major expansion, but they still had to continue to add services, two on Saturday nights and three on Sunday mornings. They began adding campuses in neighboring towns.<sup>48</sup>

Chan describes the growth of Cornerstone's early days. "I wish you could have seen how God worked in those early days! Things took off! Nothing was perfect, but there was so much excitement. Visitors found our services compelling, so we kept growing . . . God was stirring hearts, the number of people who were gathering to sing and hear the Word of God kept growing, and we had to keep adding services."<sup>49</sup>

However, Chan and Cornerstone's elders began to question whether their idea of success was adequate. "Was this really what the Church is meant to be? Is this all God had in mind when He created His Church in the first place?"

In particular, they questioned two things. First, they questioned the level of love they had for one another. "Cornerstone was by most standards a pretty loving church. But next to the example of the early church in the New Testament, it just fell flat. Jesus said the world should know us by our love (John 13:35) . . . we came to the painful conclusion that when unbelievers came to our services, they weren't observing anything supernatural about the way we loved one another."<sup>50</sup>

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48. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 12-13.

49. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 12-13.

50. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 14.

The elders also were concerned about how Cornerstone had grown to be very dependent on one person. People began to question what would happen if Chan ever left. Also, only a few people were using their gifts, while thousands came and sat in a sanctuary for an hour and a half and went home. “The way we had structured the church was stunting people’s growth, and the whole body was weaker for it.”<sup>51</sup>

Through a series of God-initiated events, the Chan family stepped out of leadership at Cornerstone, sold their house, and moved out of the country. They spent time in India, Thailand, and China. This time allowed them to refocus on their mission. It exposed them to fearless dedication and boldness from the pastors in India, the simplicity of lifestyles in rural Thailand, and the gospel spread in China as believers endured and even rejoiced in persecution.<sup>52</sup>

The Chan family eventually moved back to San Francisco. Their only goal was to live as biblically as they knew how. Francis would walk around the city, sharing the gospel and listening to God as to people he should disciple. They fed the homeless and went door to door to pray for people in low-income housing. This prompted his daughter to say, “It felt like we jumped out of the Bible.”<sup>53</sup>

Chan wrote *Letters to the Church* to answer questions such as, “How should the church function?” and “What does God intend the church to be?” This book details his embrace of the home church as an answer to these questions. He opens the first chapter with this very thought.

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51. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 15.

52. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 18.

53. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 20.

“Imagine you find yourself stranded on a deserted island with nothing but a copy of the Bible. You have no experience with Christianity whatsoever, and all you know about the Church will come from your reading of the Bible. How would you imagine a church to function? Seriously.”<sup>54</sup>

Chan spends the rest of the book describing theological reasons and functional benefits of the house church: there is no paid clergy but only bi-vocational pastors; no money is spent on property (lease, mortgage, renovations, or repairs); churches can give away 100 percent of their income. Functionally, his approach also allows churches to multiply quickly, compared with the time and resources required to multiply a church like Cornerstone.

#### Similarities with *Rooted*

Though Chan promotes house churches, there are still similarities with *Rooted*. The main unique similarity is that both Chan and *Rooted* are influenced by the global church, not just the American church. Chan credits his transformation to those mentioned above in India, Thailand, and China. He also refers to conversations with pastors from Brazil and the Philippines,<sup>55</sup> while *Rooted* started in Kenya and has contributors from all over the world.<sup>56</sup> Suffering is the topic most impacted by this influence. *Rooted* not only devotes a whole week to the topic of suffering,

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54. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 9.

55. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 151, 155.

56. Mariners Church, *Rooted: Connect with God, the Church, Your Purpose* (2011), version 2.0, 222-23. There are contributors from Kenya, Uganda, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, and Sri Lanka.

but the subsequent week's devotions teach on spiritual warfare.<sup>57</sup> Chan also devotes his chapter "Crucified" to the topic.<sup>58</sup>

### Differences with *Rooted*

Chan's work, like the others, both highlights a strength of *Rooted* and exposes a potential weakness. *Rooted*'s strength is that it can be implemented within the local church, as it does not insist on separating from a local church. There would be great difficulty implementing Chan's ideas within a church. *Rooted* is much more implementable because it is clearer about expectations, while Chan writes about open-ended gatherings where a church may read aloud the whole book of Revelation or where people read the Bible from cover to cover over a course of seventy-two consecutive hours.<sup>59</sup>

In *Letters to the Church*, Chan stokes a thought-provoking potential weakness of *Rooted* and SouthPointe: the respect of leaders.

Some of you have experienced a form of home churches where the leader is rebelling against authority and simply doing what he or she wants to do. That's not healthy. The size of the church has nothing to do with this point. As we have, God designed His Church to function under the leadership and humble, service-oriented authority of elders (1 Pet. 5:1-4). At a time when everyone bashes leadership, God calls us to show the world something different: people who love having a King and joyfully follow godly leaders.<sup>60</sup>

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57. *Rooted*, 63-106.

58. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 127-50.

59. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 58-59.

60. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 178.



While this topic is not explicitly covered in *Rooted*, the *Rooted* material strongly points out that leaders are to be facilitators, not teachers.<sup>61</sup> If language does create culture, Chan provokes the question that I will think about beyond this project: “Does *Rooted*’s language and approach reinforce leadership-phobic people?”

### Neil Cole

Neil Cole is a leading voice on house churches, though he never set out to start a house church, or, as he refers to them, “organic churches.”<sup>62</sup> His journey began with eight years as a pastor of a pretty normal church in the suburbs of southern California. He spent time developing leaders to plant new churches, which resulted in three daughter churches. Over time, he grew content there as lives were changed, leaders developed, and ministry prospered. He turned down any opportunity to leave. However, after publishing a resource for developing leaders, he felt a release from that church, though he was uncertain as to where he was called.<sup>63</sup>

“It was at this time, in the seventh year of my pastorate, that we started to feel some overt attack from the enemy.”<sup>64</sup> He first describes attacks on their property: kids growing marijuana in the undeveloped land of church property, condoms in their parking lot, and finally, a young man

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61. Mariners Church, *Facilitator Guide* (2011), version 2.0, 5.

62. Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), Kindle edition, 23. “We avoid the house church label for a couple of reasons. First, the house church in the United States has a reputation in some circles for being composed of angry, nonconformist people . . . A second reason we avoid the house church label is because Christ’s church is not contained by any building, whether it has a steeple on the roof or a chimney.”

63. Cole, *Organic Church*, 17-18.

64. Cole, *Organic Church*, 118.

who hanged himself on their property. Then the attacks personalized. His oldest and dearest friend went through a season of depression and lashed out at him, calling him a fake who does not belong in ministry. A fellow pastor in the area questioned his character, calling, and competency in front of other peers. Another pastor called him to let him know that many atrocious sins were being committed in churches over which he was overseeing as denominational moderator.<sup>65</sup>

His mentor unexpectedly visited him and said, “‘It sounds like you are being toughened up for something.’ I replied, ‘It feels like I’m being tenderized.’ Indeed, my heart was becoming increasingly tender. I felt tender to the sufferings of Christ.”<sup>66</sup> This tenderizing extended to those who were attacking him and to people, like the young man who committed suicide, who had no hope.

God used this period in Cole’s life to prompt the question, “What barometer measures how the church is doing?” He believes the answer is transformation, not attendance. This answer stimulated a follow-up question, “What must be done to transform churches and our approach?” Cole offers a twofold answer to this question. First, he believes the church must initiate the Great Commission. “We have reversed what Jesus said, as we have resorted from going into all the world to asking the world to come to us to hear our message.”<sup>67</sup> By initiating the Great Commission, Cole contends that “church should happen where life happens.”<sup>68</sup>

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65. Cole, *Organic Church*, 19.

66. Cole, *Organic Church*, 20-21.

67. Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvi.

68. Cole, *Organic Church*, 24.

Second, reproduction is needed to transform many lives. This conviction inspired Cole to plant churches among urban postmoderns. He would not settle for planting a single church; he would settle for nothing less than a movement. Cole even committed to abandon all practices that hold them back from the goal of multiplication. “I have found there are many effective ministry methods that also hold back multiplication. Success, as defined by most of Christendom, is often counter to healthy reproduction. We were willing to abandon anything that would not multiply healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements.”<sup>69</sup> This conviction resulted in Cole starting an organization, called Church Multiplication Associates (CMA), to develop the resources to accomplish the mission.<sup>70</sup>

Cole’s movement practices two levels of reproduction. The first and most basic unit of church is what Cole calls Life Transformation Groups of two to three people. He gives seven reasons why groups of two or three are best for spiritual growth.<sup>71</sup> These small groups are to reproduce disciples, whom he defines as someone committed to the DNA “God’s living truth (D), in the context of loving relationships (N) and a global mission (A), provides the integrity in an organic church movement.”<sup>72</sup> Reproduction of disciples is easier at this level, according to Cole, for “if you have a group of three and want to multiply groups of two or three, to multiply

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69. Cole, *Organic Church*, 22.

70. Cole, *Organic Church*, 22.

71. Cole, *Organic Church*, 100-102. Each of the following seven elements is stronger in groups of two or three people: the community, accountability, confidentiality, flexibility, communication, direction, and leadership.

72. Cole, *Organic Church*, 129.

all you need is to find one other person. By reducing multiplication to this simplest level, reproduction can be part of the genetic fabric of the entire body of Christ.”<sup>73</sup>

The second level of reproduction should be groups of ten to twenty people, which are churches in the CMA. Cole’s organization began 10 new churches in the first year, 18 in the second year, and 52 in the third year. That number more than doubled to 106 churches in 2002, increased to more than 200 new churches in 2003, and doubled to more than 400 new starts in 2004. “At the time of this writing, there have been close to 800 churches started in thirty-two states and twenty-three nations around the world, in only six years.”<sup>74</sup> These churches averaged sixteen people. “We started articulating this profound goal for CMA: ‘We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.’”<sup>75</sup>

#### Similarities with *Rooted*

The greatest unique similarity between *Rooted* and *Organic Church* is the emphasis on the power of personal stories, or testimonies. When Cole speaks to a new audience, he asks the audience members to raise their hand if they accepted Christ anonymously, without any relational witness of another person. Usually only one or two raise their hand. He follows this question by asking each person to raise their hand if they accepted Christ because of the witness of another person: a close friend, relative, or associate. Every other Jesus follower raises their hand. He then asks the audience, “So why are we so busy planning events to attract people when

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73. Cole, *Organic Church*, 103.

74. Cole, *Organic Church*, 26.

75. Cole, *Organic Church*, 26.

relationships are actually far more effective?”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, in *Rooted*, each participant is to share their personal story within a group meeting. Participants are given questions to help them craft their own story and are challenged to pray for an opportunity to share their story during this ten-week period.

### Differences from *Rooted*

Neil Cole’s work highlights a strength and exposes a weakness within *Rooted*. The foundation provided by *Rooted* is a true strength. It allows participants to participate with large groups of people: to celebrate together, to sing praises with larger groups of people, and to use their gifts within larger contexts.

*Organic Church* exposes a slight weakness within the *Rooted* material: teaching on the passion and practice of evangelism. Cole highlights the passion of Jesus: “For me, the busier I get, the less I care about others. . . . But not so with Jesus. Matthew says, ‘Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them’ (Matt. 9:36). . . . I get frustrated at slow cars in front of me, long lines, and traffic jams. When Jesus saw the crowds, He saw more than an obstacle getting in the way of His mission. He saw His mission, and He felt compassion for them.”<sup>77</sup> He continues, “The epidemic begins with the right heart for people. If we do not start with seeing the world through the eyes and guts of Jesus, we will not have the heart to even get started. Motivation is crucial.”<sup>78</sup>

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76. Cole, *Organic Church*, 162.

77. Cole, *Organic Church*, 145-46.

78. Cole, *Organic Church*, 156.

In practice, he recommends four pieces of advice: ride along with local police officers, as they will lead you to fertile soil; search the paper for bankruptcies or foreclosures, call the person if the number is available, tell them that your heart was broken thinking about their situation, and offer to pray; find where a local twelve-step group meets; and be available as a listening ear or prayer at a crisis pregnancy center or even near an abortion clinic.<sup>79</sup> In reality, *Rooted*'s weakness only appears weak when it is placed next to Cole's great strength.

### **Collective Evaluation**

*Rooted* provides the most clear, holistic, accessible, implementable, and foundational discipleship resource for an average American church. Foundationally, it provides the most systematic theology of any resource mentioned. Holistically, it provides discipleship habits, especially beyond the last four resources mentioned. It is accessible and simple, as it is clear on what a disciple looks like and clear about how to live like this. It is also implementable.

*Rooted*'s strengths make it the best discipleship resource for SouthPointe at this time.

Though it is the best for SouthPointe at this time, other voices expose weaknesses that need to be supplemented through teaching and training. First, it lacks teaching on the Sabbath and much depth about the soul-training exercises of silence and solitude, as *Good and Beautiful* exposed. Second, *Rooted* does not teach an approach on reading the Bible or how to use the Bible itself as the curriculum for the small group, as the Real-Life Ministry material exposes. Third, there is very little teaching on how individuals are to personally make disciples, as Breen's material does. Fourth, it can be seen as lacking in developing the respect for healthy

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79. Cole, *Organic Church*, 75.

leadership, as Chan exposes. Finally, it is weaker than *Organic Church* in its heart and clarity for evangelism.

### **What My Project Will Add**

Much has been written about discipleship. These are merely five resources of the myriad of resources available. One might question what my project adds to this seemingly crowded conversation. But my project adds the perspective of a passionate, reflective practitioner from a real context. As chapter 1 states, SouthPointe is an average American church. It is not a megachurch. It is a church with limited resources. It is a church where volunteers have jobs and limitations. It is a church that has tried different small group approaches in the past. It is a church with large group gatherings.

The perspective of a practitioner in an average American church is needed. This is confirmed both positively and negatively. Positively, this is confirmed by the creation of a conference for normal pastors.<sup>80</sup> This “Normal Pastor Conference” calls itself a conference “for the rest of us.” It is the simple goal of “leaving a legacy of simple faithfulness to the local church.” This conference does not include megachurch pastors with unique numeric success speaking to practitioners of average churches. Such speakers, though valuable, lack a commonality of context. The creation of this conference affirms that average practitioners also crave the perspective of fellow average practitioners.

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80. Liberty Baptist Church, “NormalPastor Conference: A Conference for the Rest of Us,” accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.lbcliberty.org/npc>.

The need for a practitioner's perspective is negatively affirmed by a well-liked Amazon review on *Letters to the Church*. At the time of this writing, Joe Terrell's review has generated twice as many responses as the reviews on Chan's resource itself.<sup>81</sup> Terrell affirms the content in Chan's work but notes that it fails to help the average American church make disciples.

This is a hard book to criticize. . . . Let me be clear: I love Francis Chan. His conviction and passion for Jesus are absolutely infectious. . . . However, I have absolutely no idea what a reader is supposed to take away from *Letters to the Church*. . . . It's no secret the American Church is fraught with consumerism, individualism, and laziness. And much of Chan's observations are spot-on. However, instead of tackling the systems that create passive churchgoers, Chan appears to level a bulk of his criticisms at church leaders and churchgoers. In other words, if your church isn't a house church (that is consistently reproducing), you're going to feel awful about your church experience after reading this book. . . . What is the average churchgoer supposed to do? What is a pastor's next course of action? To be clear, I'm not defending a traditional model of church. I fully agree with Chan's grievances. But if our church doesn't look like what Chan is describing in the (fantastic, by the way) final chapter of *Letters to the Church*, should we leave? Start our own house church? Or seek to reform our church from the inside-out? Talk about it with like-minded individuals? And how are we supposed to do any of that without openly discussing our church's shortcomings (i.e., criticizing)? Is there a difference?<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, my project helps the average practitioner answer the question, "Where do I start?" by assessing *Rooted* alongside other key voices. My project also helps average practitioners implement this (or any similar) resource within the context of an average American church. The average American church has Sunday gatherings with singing and a sermon, as well as ministry teams with volunteers. These resources explored in this chapter each focus on their particular discipleship approach. Each lacks adequate descriptions on how the other elements of a church, namely, sermons and ministry team trainings, contributes to an average church's plan

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81. *Letters to the Church* has received 554 ratings, while this review has 1,011 likes.

82. Joe Terrell, "Well Intentioned Message Hampered by Limited Application (Updated)," accessed October 24, 2019, [https://www.amazon.com/Letters-Church-Francis-Chan/dp/0830776583/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?keywords=Letters+to+the+church&qid=1571927454&sr=8-3#customerReviews](https://www.amazon.com/Letters-Church-Francis-Chan/dp/0830776583/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=Letters+to+the+church&qid=1571927454&sr=8-3#customerReviews).



toward discipleship. My project thus offers an average church perspective both in implementing a discipleship resource and in how to supplement its minor weaknesses with other elements of an average church.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DISCIPLESHIP IN CONTEXT**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter resets the context in order to lay a foundation for learning described in the final chapter. There are two main sections to reset the context. First, I elaborate my personal motivation as a passionate, reflective practitioner for this particular project. Second, the context of this project is described in detail. The goal is for the resetting of the context to help readers contextualize this project into their own settings.

#### **Passionate, Reflective Practitioner**

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary desires its students to be “passionate, reflective practitioners.”<sup>1</sup> Passion, or “any powerful or compelling emotion or feeling, such as love or hate,”<sup>2</sup> sustains one’s work. Reflection, or “a fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration,”<sup>3</sup> allows one to think through a topic an in-depth level. Practice, or one “engaged in habitual or customary performance,”<sup>4</sup> allows direction for passionate and application for one’s

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1. David Currie, “Is There a Doctor in the Church? Why Pursue Doctoral Studies,” accessed November 20, 2019, <https://gordonconwell.edu/blog/why-pursue-doctoral-studies/>. Currie writes, “I describe the purpose of our D.Min. program as nurturing passionate, reflective practitioners. We want our graduates to be more passionate about Christ and their ministry, to build up a base of knowledge and relationships that will help them reflect upon their life and ministry more incisively, and to be more effective at doing their ministry in the long-, as well as the short-term.”

2. “Passion,” accessed November 10, 2019, [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com).

3. “Reflection,” accessed November 10, 2019, [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com).

4. “Practice,” accessed November 10, 2019, [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com).

reflection. These three characteristics form the basis for my choice of this particular thesis-project.

### Passion

I chose to pursue a degree in Church Planting and Multiplication because church planting is a passion. In addition to planting SouthPointe, I have officially served as a church planting coach,<sup>5</sup> as well as an unofficial coach for current church planters. Currently, I am the president of the board of a church planting organization.<sup>6</sup>

Church planting, however, is not my primary passion; making disciples and discipleship is. There are no scriptural commands, for example, to plant churches; there is only the command to make disciples. Church planting is, however, a means to the end of discipleship.<sup>7</sup> Church planting is one of the most effective methods to disciple making,<sup>8</sup> but that effectiveness wanes in the average American church.<sup>9</sup>

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5. I coached Jeff Stalnaker, the lead planter of OceanPointe Christian Church, which launched in April 2014.

6. I am currently the president of Restoration House Ministries' board of directors.

7. David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle, locations 2711-22. Olson, after providing the research I described in chapter 1, answered the question, "What changes would the American church have to make to reverse ongoing decline and to keep up with population growth?" He concluded, "Established churches need to actively parent new churches. Planting a new church should become a part of the long-range outreach plan of established congregations, either through parenting or as a group of partner churches. Does your church have anything of value to pass on to future generations? If so, your church should plant a new church, as church planting is the best method for sustained generational transmission of the Christian faith."

8. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, locations 2730-31. "It is five to seven times easier to plant a new church than it is to revitalize an established church."

9. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, locations 2772-73. "Established churches must embrace church planting as a primary method of passing the faith on to future generations."

My foundational passion, therefore, is making disciples, or individuals who have “come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> I agree with Francis Chan: “God designed the Church to be much more than what the majority of us experience in America.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus wants more than well-attended worship services; he desires discipleship, or an “ongoing process of growth as a disciple. Discipling implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another grow as disciples.”<sup>12</sup> Disciples grow in intimacy with the triune God, transformation from isolation to humility and boldness, and community with fellow believers.

Most foundationally, I am passionate about discipleship because people were made to be in a relationship with the triune God. “The Trinity can be presented as a fusty and irrelevant dogma, but the truth is that God is love because God is a Trinity.”<sup>13</sup> Like Reeves’s purpose in writing, the purpose of discipleship is “about growing in our enjoyment of God and seeing how God’s triune being makes all his ways beautiful. It is a chance to taste and see that the Lord is good, to have your heart won and yourself refreshed. For it is only when you grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God.”<sup>14</sup>

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10. Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 40.

11. Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 26.

12. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 41.

13. Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), Kindle, location 45.

14. Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, locations 46-50.

The transformation through discipleship also leads people out of the isolation of sin. As I wrote in chapter 2, sin isolates, and isolation cause sin. Personally, my conviction of sin intensified when I read “The Great Sin” in *Mere Christianity*, in which C. S. Lewis describes the sin of pride as getting “no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man.”<sup>15</sup> Upon reflecting on this personal sin for years, I realized it has caused isolation within my spirit. When engaged in this sin, I have reversed the command of Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” Rather, I have rejoiced when others, even people I love, have mourned; and I have mourned when those same people have had moments of rejoicing.

Discipleship, however, leads one out of isolation and to personal transformation through relationship with this triune God. As described in the theological vision in chapter 2, this transformation moves disciples from fear to boldness and from pride to humility. Hannah Anderson similarly describes this process:

I do regularly feel worn out, anxious about my abilities, and caught in cycles of comparison and perfectionism. To use Jesus’ words. I regularly feel “heavy laden.” For years, I’ve heard that the solution to such stress comes from setting up boundaries, finding ways to be more productive, cultivating gratitude, and scheduling “me time.” For years, I’ve believed that finding rest comes from both simultaneously learning to let go and keeping your act together. For I’ve thought peace depends entirely on me. . . .”Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, *for I am gentle and lowly in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls.” In other words, peace doesn’t start with me; peace starts with him. Even more surprisingly, peace starts with learning his humility.<sup>16</sup>

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15. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001), 122.

16. Hannah Anderson, *Humble Roots: How Humility Grounds and Nourishes Your Soul* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2016), Kindle, 9.

Andrew Murray also describes this freedom: “The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him.”<sup>17</sup> This attitude comes only through discipleship-prompted intimacy with God and others.

Discipleship not only helps individuals find intimacy with God and move out of isolation, but also it moves them into a committed relationship with others. Francis Chan, when describing what is lacking in the average American church, compares the level of relational commitment typically present within gangs with the commitment within such a church. A member of Chan’s church and a former gang member, Rob, described the fear he experienced when he left his gang to join the church within prison. Such a break with a gang could be suicidal, because gangs are anything but casual about those breaking ties. “It wasn’t just the physical torture or death he feared; he dreaded the reject by those he loved. The gang was his family. These were loyal and dear friends who looked out for him twenty-four hours a day. There was a love and camaraderie from being in a gang that he had enjoyed since childhood.”<sup>18</sup> Chan concludes by saying that the way Rob describes gang life

sounds like what the Church was meant to be. Obviously, there are major differences (drugs, murder—you know, little details like that), but the idea of “being a family” is central to both gang life and God’s design for the Church. Yet while we use family terminology in our churches, Rob’s stories have convinced me that the gangs have a much stronger sense of what it means to be a family than we do in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Andrew Murray, *Humility* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 46-47.

18. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 71.

19. Chan, *Letters to the Church*, 70-71. Chan continues, “From what you know about gangs, could you ever image gang life being reduced to a weekly one-hour gathering? No group would meet briefly once a week and call that a gang. Imagine one gang member walking up to another and saying, ‘Yo, how was gang? I had to miss this week because life has been crazy.’”

The intimacy Chan describes here is only present through discipleship. It is strengthened as disciples share soul-training experiences with one another.

Therefore, discipleship is my passion, because it is through discipleship that people experience intimacy with God, freedom from sin, and the family relationship of the church. My passion, therefore, desires as many people as possible to experience this, which is why I am passionate about multiplying disciples.<sup>20</sup>

### Reflection

This project, given my passion, was most worthy of deep reflection. I thought, “If we get anything right, let’s get discipleship right.” There are so many things to “get right” within a church plant. Ed Stetzer, for example, includes twenty-nine chapters in his foundational work *Planting Missional Churches*. He includes chapters on different church planting models, church structure, developing a launch team, leadership issues, finances, finding a meeting place, launching the new church, and planting future churches.<sup>21</sup> Each chapter could be reflected upon

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20. Biographically, I have always been passionate about multiplying, even in previous passions. I am not only the oldest child in my family, but I am also the oldest cousin on both sides of my family. Growing up, I would train and teach my younger brothers and cousins in sports, academics, life. I won a short essay contest in the fifth grade around the topic, “If you could be anyone in the world, who would you be?” I chose Larry Jordan, older brother of basketball great Michael Jordan, since Larry Jordan practiced against Michael during their childhood and whom Michael credits for his success. Now, my driving passion is the multiplication of discipleship in order that others may experience eternal life.

21. Ed Stetzer. *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That’s Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), ix-x.

more deeply. Stetzer's list isn't exhaustive: the formation of a decision-making metric<sup>22</sup> or the development and training of the first elders<sup>23</sup> within a church would also be worth deep reflection, especially in the context of a new church.

Yet, while important, all such potential areas of study pale into comparison with the importance of discipleship. Robert Coleman, in his classic work *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, calls readers to focus on discipleship in the midst of the busyness. "Merely because we are busy, or even skilled, at doing something does not necessarily mean that we are getting anything accomplished. The question must always be asked: Is it worth doing? And does it get the job done?"<sup>24</sup> By focusing merely on busyness, we are focusing on the current generation. But, he says, "Really it [discipleship] is a question of which generation we are living for."<sup>25</sup>

Dallas Willard encourages two questions to guide this reflection: "First, what is our plan for making disciples? Second, does our plan work?"<sup>26</sup> This thesis-project, thus, provided an opportunity to reflect deeply on these questions in the context of an average American church. It

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22. Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 150-51. "The most powerful tool I've found for overcoming these differences and for making sure that my staff is aligned in terms of their day-to-day values and decisions is something I call 'ministry plumb lines.' . . . Ministry plumb lines function like a carpenter's or mason's plumb line. They make sure our programs, ministries and decisions line up with the core values and priorities we claim to have. And they let everyone know how we are supposed to do things around here. In a sense, they're organizational proverbs—a list of pithy sayings that describe clearly and consciously what we value and what I expect our staff to think through when making ministry decisions."

23. I believe writing a thesis about the institution of first elders within a church plant would be a worthy endeavor. Such a topic could explore why God instituted this office in the first place, the theology of it, various writings about it, and a process.

24. Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1993), 13.

25. Coleman, *Master Plan of Evangelism*, 35.

26. Mike Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders* (Pawley Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2012), Kindle, location 387.



provided the opportunity to apply what Coleman views as top priority: “Surely if the pattern of Jesus at this point means anything at all, it teaches that the first duty of a church leadership is to see to it that a foundation is laid in the beginning on which can be built an effective and continuing evangelistic ministry to the multitudes.”<sup>27</sup>

Reflecting upon and articulating SouthPointe’s plan for making disciples and then evaluating if “our plan works” benefits both church plants and established churches. Ideally, it gives such churches a starting point from which they can contextualize into their own culture and context, and thus contributes to “ministry to the multitudes.”

### Practice

This thesis-project comes from the perspective of a practitioner. I practice discipleship with SouthPointe’s staff. I practice discipleship with SouthPointe members. I do not confine my involvement to leaders, but my wife and I host and lead a *Rooted* group. I have faith-centered conversations with community members who are not a part of a church through my involvement in the Rotary Club, time spent in coffee shops, relationships in my neighborhood, and representation of the faith-based community to local parolees.

I am in a community of practitioners, in a network of other churches and church plants started by the same organization, Restoration House Ministries. Therefore, my perspective of this thesis-project is designed with fellow practitioners, in real churches, in mind.

The fact that I am a practitioner in a community of practitioners is the very reason why this project adds to the discipleship conversation. The value of this project comes not from

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27. Coleman, *Master Plan of Evangelism*, 32.

unusual success, but because SouthPointe's story and context is close to average. While many of the discipleship resources provide helpful insights and inspiration, applying their principles is much more difficult in practice. "In theory, there's no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is."<sup>28</sup>

## **Project Overview**

Describing the context of *this* project also helps readers contextualize this project into their own settings. A detailed project overview lays a foundation for the findings to be described in chapter 5 and thus maximizes impact. This section, then, answers the questions Why? When? What? and How? of this project.

### **Why**

The purpose of this project is to test Willard's second question, "Does it work?" in SouthPointe's context. However, readers need more detail regarding SouthPointe's answer to his first question, "First, what is our plan for making disciples?" SouthPointe has answered this by establishing what is internally called a "discipleship pathway."

A discipleship pathway describes how someone might move from infancy to maturity in his or her faith journey. It is SouthPointe's statement that discipleship should mirror theology's characteristics of being "biblical, livable, and systematic," if theology is indeed the power of discipleship.<sup>29</sup> This pathway systematically provides clear next steps, all of which center on

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28. This is an anonymous saying. The origins are unknown.

29. Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2001), 16-17.

Scripture and make discipleship livable. SouthPointe's discipleship pathway climaxes not by achievement or graduation from one step or another, but in the establishment of discipleship habits. These habits are the seven rhythms of *Rooted*,<sup>30</sup> and the entire discipleship pathways helps one develop such habits.

Individuals are encouraged to participate in either Starting Point or *Rooted*, as their first step toward discipleship. Those who are new to the faith are encouraged to participate in Starting Point. Produced by Andy Stanley and North Point Ministries, it is designed to be “an 8-week gathering where your questions about God turn into a conversation about faith. In a Starting Point group, you can discuss your doubts and explore the trickiest topics of faith, free from pressure and judgment.”<sup>31</sup> SouthPointe adds an introductory meeting where participants share a brief overview of their life story, thus making it a nine-week experience. After completion of Starting Point, participants are encouraged to participate in *Rooted*. Individuals can also directly participate in *Rooted*, as a first step in the discipleship pathway. This is encouraged for those who have some basis for the faith or who simply prefer it.

After *Rooted* groups complete the ten-week curriculum, they are encouraged to stay together and continue to meet as a home group. These groups are given a choice of curricula,<sup>32</sup>

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30. The seven rhythms of *Rooted* are daily devotion, prayer, freedom from strongholds, sacrificial generosity, serve the community, share your story, and celebration.

31. “A Conversation about Faith,” startingpoint.com, North Point Ministries, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.startingpoint.com/>.

32. There are two sets of curricula that align with *Rooted*. The first is Mark E. Moore, *Core 52: A Fifteen-Minute Daily Guide to Build Your Bible IQ in a Year* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2019). The other is the “Good and Beautiful” trilogy by James Bryan Smith: *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); and *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010).

with the goal for home group members to continue to practice daily devotions. They are also expected to maintain two of the shared, soul-training exercises of *Rooted* quarterly: the prayer experience and a serve experience.<sup>33</sup>

The multiplication of leaders is also a necessary part of a discipleship pathway. After the initial ten weeks of *Rooted* are complete, facilitators are asked about potential facilitators within their group. Those potential leaders then go through a *Rooted* facilitator training. This process multiplies leaders while maintaining the consistency of *Rooted*, as it helps ensure that each *Rooted* facilitator will have participated in *Rooted* before leading her or his own group.

SouthPointe's discipleship pathway provides a starting place for new or established churches. It is SouthPointe's systematic, or organized, attempt not only to teach what Jesus taught, but also how SouthPointe attempts to teach one how to obey everything Jesus taught. It provides a discipleship that is biblical and livable, one that emphasizes both orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

### When

It is also helpful to know when this project took place in SouthPointe's context and history to help readers contextualize this project. *Rooted* began on October 6, 2019, which was almost eight years into SouthPointe's existence. Though SouthPointe had plateaued and even declined in 2016–2018, this year (2019) has witnessed quantifiable growth. Attendance has increased from 235 in 2018 to 281 in 2019.<sup>34</sup> There have also been twenty-six baptisms through

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33. The logistics of the serve experience are assisted by other SouthPointe leaders.

34. The average has slightly dipped since writing the first chapter.

the first nine months of this year, already the third most baptisms in SouthPointe's history.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to attribute this numeric growth to any one factor.<sup>36</sup>

While these statistics provide an overview of the context, it is also beneficial to know when this project happened in SouthPointe's discipleship history. SouthPointe has always had and emphasized small groups, though there have been three major directions through SouthPointe's history prior to *Rooted*.

SouthPointe groups initially sought to replicate groups from Real-Life Ministries. These groups followed the biblical storying model described in chapter 3. They also sought to serve the community together each month. This effort to serve, however, failed for two primary reasons: it was difficult for groups themselves to arrange the logistics of each opportunity and childcare was difficult during these serving opportunities.<sup>37</sup>

During this time, SouthPointe sought to launch an effort in individual disciple making. There was an effort to make disciples in "three environments." This idea was conceived by examining the ministry of Jesus: as Jesus taught the crowds, SouthPointe ministered through Sunday mornings; as Jesus discipled the twelve, SouthPointe emphasized small groups; and as Jesus invested in Peter, James, and John, SouthPointe encouraged one-on-one discipleship relationships. However, this individual disciple-making effort failed as a clear curriculum, plan,

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35. SouthPointe baptized thirty-eight people in 2013 and thirty people in 2015.

36. As I detailed in chapter 1, the number of factors could include the presence and ministry of SouthPointe's shepherd team, which has helped SouthPointe staff members grow in health; a new, permanent location; the church-wide financial program from the spring of 2019, as an individual's financial peace can contribute toward spiritual growth; the focus on the equipping of lay leaders; or a new staff member.

37. Groups met during the evenings, when many organizations were closed.

pathway, and training were never developed. Such is the reason why a discipleship pathway must be clear and livable.

Second, SouthPointe transitioned from the three environments and biblical storytelling approach to sermon-based small groups, where small groups would discuss the Scripture and sermon from the previous Sunday. Larry Osborne's reasoning in *Sticky Church* led to this transition. He believes this approach not only creates cohesiveness but also helps new Christians find the Bible accessible.<sup>38</sup>

Finally and most recently, SouthPointe moved to an approach similar to Nelson Searcy's small group approach, which gives leaders freedom to choose their curriculum.<sup>39</sup> The transition to this method was due to maximizing time and energy. It took place as SouthPointe's Small Group Ministry leader resigned and was not replaced, as well as when SouthPointe purchased and renovated a building. The building renovation was led by the same person who came to oversee the small group ministry.<sup>40</sup> He described the impact of this season on small groups: "Our

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38. Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). Kindle edition, locations 905-907. He describes his reasoning: "But if it's a discussion about a sermon they've heard and experienced, most of them will be much quicker to share their thoughts and insights. Especially if the questions are phrased in a way that asks, 'What did you think of . . . ?' 'How do you feel when . . . ?' 'What jumped out at you most and why?'"

39. Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008), Kindle edition, locations 1057-1068. SouthPointe's leaders were convinced of the benefits Searcy mentions: "When you give your leaders the freedom to implement interesting, creative groups, you infuse your small groups system with life. There are numerous advantages to allowing your leaders to choose the theme and/or topic of their groups each semester. Here are a few: • The availability of different topics decreases the chances that a group will become inwardly focused. People's interest in signing up for a specific topic will outweigh their desire to stay with one group leader indefinitely. • Different types of groups (e.g., sports groups, moms' groups, writing groups) will make nonbelievers and seekers who are attending your church more willing to sign up. They may be more interested in meeting some new people and playing basketball than they are in studying James. At this point, that's fine. They may need to belong before they believe. The group's theme brings them in so that they can connect with believers and learn about God. • People will grow faster when they are studying something they have an expressed interest in, allowing you to more easily identify future leaders and potential staff people. • Men are more willing to join groups that are based on intriguing topics and built around creatively themed activities."

40. He also oversees two other staff members and the finance team. His wife was diagnosed with cancer, and a transplant caused her to stay homebound for one hundred days.

home groups suffered the most during this time. There was not any growth, but a decline in group participation.”<sup>41</sup>

This prompted the evaluation of SouthPointe’s home group focus and the establishment of a discipleship pathway. The evaluation is articulated in *Rooted*’s material: “I believe the Church thinks the same way about making disciples. Every place of worship has a different recipe.”<sup>42</sup> SouthPointe’s establishment of a discipleship pathway was an agreement with *Rooted*’s author. “But can good sometimes become the enemy of best? Can focus on these things divert us from what is truly essential, the all-encompassing core-calling that Jesus left for His followers, to turn ordinary disciples into fearless world changers.”<sup>43</sup>

The shift to *Rooted* was a shift toward a discipleship focus in our home groups. *Rooted* provided a great balance: it is consistent with SouthPointe’s culture and language, but it also provided a new direction. *Rooted*’s focus on prayer, serving, and storytelling matches SouthPointe’s, but *Rooted* weaves each of these into a smaller group structure.

Each of SouthPointe’s existing seven home groups participated in *Rooted*. There were also six new groups formed as *Rooted* started. Each of these thirteen total groups contained people of all ages and genders, with the exception of SouthPointe’s “Mom’s Group.” This group

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41. Jamie Lankford has said this multiple times. The most notable was in a Shepherd Team meeting on September 29, 2019.

42. Mariners Church, *Rooted: Connect with God, the Church, Your Purpose* (2011), version 2.0, 12. This is described in more detail: “Some think the world is ignorant, so we must focus on teaching and education. Some churches believe the world is sick and in need of deliverance, so they focus on counseling and healing. There are churches who believe that the world is evil and Christians must separate themselves from the rest. Some churches believe the world is lost. People need salvation and rescue from hell. There are churches that focus on compassion, believing the world is needy and hurting. All of the above statements are true of our world. All of these churches are focusing on good things.”

43. *Rooted*, 12.

is comprised of mothers, many of whom are in other *Rooted* groups. This group is using this season to discuss the *Rooted* material's impact on parenting. The mom's group leader is a co-leader of another *Rooted* group. With only two exceptions, each *Rooted* facilitator participated in a pilot group.

All together, 150 people initially signed up for *Rooted*. There were also 11 people in Starting Point, 25 people in Celebrate Recovery, and 35 teenagers in their own small groups. Therefore, 220 people participated in a small group. The average Sunday morning sees 220 teens and adults. This does not mean that each Sunday attendee participates in a smaller group, since not every Sunday morning attendee attends each week.

### What

SouthPointe has implemented *Rooted* strictly according to the plan established by its authors. *Rooted*, according to its own plan, must be *the* pathway to discipleship. It cannot be included in a menu of other discipleship choices, like Searcy's approach.<sup>44</sup> This solo focus is based on the history of Mariners Church, which contextualized *Rooted* for the United States. After initially learning of this curriculum from the Kenyan church, Mariners brought it back to its own context. They added it to a list of small group options, but the results did not match the results in Kenya. When Mariners inquired about the possible reason, Pastor Wanjau pointed to the many options Mariners offered as being a distraction.<sup>45</sup> SouthPointe's *Rooted* director has

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44. Recovery ministry and a Starting Point, or parallel class, are the exceptions. In SouthPointe's discipleship pathway, Starting Point participants are encouraged to participate next in *Rooted*.

45. Jared Kirkwood, *Rooted* Network Pastor, said this at a "*Rooted* Launch Initiative" on October 16, 2019, in Manchester, NH.



been coached by a *Rooted* regional representative, which has allowed many questions to be asked and answers to be given. He has also participated in every available regional training.

SouthPointe, by aligning all existing home groups and new groups, can effectively test *Rooted* in a real context.<sup>46</sup> Mariners Church now claims that 90 percent of *Rooted* groups become ongoing life groups, 82 percent of *Rooted* participants increase their generosity, and 70 percent of *Rooted* participants increase their serving.<sup>47</sup> I anticipate *Rooted* participants to increase the consistency of daily devotions, time spent serving the community, the number of times one shares her or his testimony, and sacrificial generosity. I also expect an increased number of baptisms through *Rooted*. Each will be measured at the end of the initial *Rooted* experience.

## How

I am testing the effectiveness of *Rooted* in three ways: a pre-test and post-test survey of *Rooted* participants, a post-*Rooted* interview with *Rooted* facilitators, and an evaluation of the number of baptisms over the ten weeks of *Rooted* compared with other ten-week periods in SouthPointe's history. These three evaluations are slightly different than the evaluations I proposed in chapter 1. I note the differences, and the reasons for the differences, in this section.

First, the pre-test and post-test survey tests *Rooted*'s effectiveness in increasing participant's daily devotions, prayer, time spent serving the community, generosity, and number

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46. Not every church follows the curriculum exactly. Rick Moore, lead pastor of Cranston Christian Fellowship, relayed in an October 15, 2019, conversation that he was not familiar with *Rooted*'s instruction to host the "Week 8" discussion on generosity in a large group setting. This church had started *Rooted* prior to fully being trained.

47. Allen White, "How Mariners' Rooted Journey Grows Groups, Service and Giving," Taking the Guesswork Out of Groups (blog), April 25, 2016, accessed August 26, 2019, <http://allenwhite.org/2016/04/25/mariners-rooted-journey-grows-groups-service-giving/>.

of times one shared her or his story. A pre-test survey was distributed by each facilitator on the opening night of *Rooted*, where *Rooted* participants met together and then broke into their individual *Rooted* groups. The completed pre-test surveys were put in an envelope and given to a survey administrator. She inputted the results directly into Survey Monkey, an online survey forum.<sup>48</sup>

This survey first compiled demographic information, in order to test *Rooted*'s effectiveness within certain demographics. It asked each participant for her or his middle name, in order to keep the participants anonymous, while still being able to track individual growth. This survey also asked gender, age, family status, time spent as a Jesus follower, and if someone participated in a home group in the last year. For age, the categories included an 18-29-year-old bracket, and then options for each decade. The following family statuses were given as choices: single; living with spouse/partner, no kids under 18 at home; living with spouse/partner, and have kids under 18 at home; living with kids under 18 and no spouse/partner; and other. Finally, to measure time spent following Jesus, participants were given the following choices: I'm not a Jesus follower, 0-2 years, 3-5 years, and more than 5 years.

There were two changes from my original survey expectations, as outlined in chapter 1. I had initially proposed to conduct thirty pre-test and post-test surveys of *Rooted* participants and non-participants. First, given the large number of participants, I thought a broader survey would be more effective than a small sample size. I surveyed each *Rooted* participant on the opening night. There were 101 pre-test surveys completed. The unforeseen challenge with this approach

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48. I chose to conduct a paper survey, rather than an online survey, based on previous experience. When SouthPointe led Financial Peace University for the entire church, paper surveys conducted in the group setting were completed at a much higher rate than an online survey after the completion of the course.

is that not every *Rooted* participant attended opening night.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, for those who did not participate on opening night, I will only have a post-test survey. While this will still provide value, it will not provide the before-and-after comparison for those participants. Second, I did not test a group of non-participants, given the overwhelming number of participants in *Rooted*, *Starting Point*, and *Celebrate Recovery*.<sup>50</sup>

The post-test survey will aim to measure an individual's growth after participation in *Rooted* and will be distributed at the final group session of *Rooted*.<sup>51</sup> It will ask the same demographic information: middle name, gender, and age. It will also gauge the level of participation in *Rooted* by asking how many *Rooted* sessions one attended, how frequently she or he completed the daily devotions, and if one participated in opening night,<sup>52</sup> the prayer experience, and the serve experience. Participants will be given the following choices for the number of *Rooted* group sessions: less than 5, 5-7 sessions, 8-9 sessions, or all 10 sessions. For consistency of daily devotions, they will be given the following choices: 0-1 a week, 2-3 per week, or 4-5 per week.

This questionnaire will seek quantifiable data by asking the following questions, based on the last three months of their lives: What percentage of your gross income do you give to church, community organizations, or people in need? Do you have a generosity goal for the future? If so,

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49. Only 101 of the 150 initial participants attended opening night.

50. This would have provided value, but it was logistically difficult to find non-participants, communicate with them, give a paper survey (which would likely have to happen on a Sunday morning), and collect it.

51. *Rooted* also includes a closing celebration. However, this final celebration happens in a large setting, as all groups come together for baptisms, stories, and fellowship.

52. Asking this question will help determine if someone completed the first survey.

what percentage do you hope to give? In the last three months, how many times have you shared your faith story with another person?

This survey will also aim to discover qualitative results from *Rooted*. It will ask *Rooted* participants the following questions, based on the last three months of their lives: How did *Rooted* impact or change your relationship with God? How did *Rooted* help connect you with the church? How did *Rooted* help connect you with your purpose? How did *Rooted* grow your courage and dependence on God? Has *Rooted* helped you given you more confidence and desire to share your story? Why or why not? Do you plan on continuing with your group after *Rooted* ends? Why or why not?

My expectation is that there will be a difference between those who participated more frequently in weekly group meetings with those who participated less, with those who participated in the prayer experience and those who did not, and those who participated in the serve experiences and those who did not.

Second, after the completion of *Rooted*, I will briefly interview each *Rooted* facilitator to gain more qualitative data. For the *Rooted* facilitators who had previously led a SouthPointe home group, I will ask how *Rooted* compared and contrasted with previous curricula and approaches. For all facilitators, I will ask them to detail the particular strengths and weaknesses of *Rooted*, as well as an evaluation to how it fits in SouthPointe's context and culture.

Unfortunately, I had not thought of this method of gathering data when writing chapter 1. I only thought of this method after numerous informal conversations with facilitators throughout the initial weeks of *Rooted*. I am confident it will provide as much, or possibly even more,

helpful data than the survey since facilitators are able to evaluate *Rooted*'s effectiveness in a more holistic and objective sense.

Finally, the third area of evaluation will be the number of baptisms over this ten-week period. This number will be compared and contrasted with the number of baptisms over an average ten-week period over the last three years. Given the increased number of baptisms prior to *Rooted* this year, there will also be a comparison to the average ten-week period from January through September 2019. While this number is worth measuring, it will undoubtedly provide the least data out of the three evaluations.<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Though this survey and project is limited in scope,<sup>54</sup> it will be beneficial to SouthPointe. It will help to answer not only the basic question, “Should SouthPointe continue *Rooted*?” but also questions like “Does *Rooted* connect with certain age groups, genders, or faith maturity levels than others?” and “How does SouthPointe need to supplement any potential weaknesses?” Answers to these questions, however, will help not only SouthPointe. New church plants and average American churches will be given SouthPointe’s discipleship pathway as an example, as well as ways SouthPointe supplements this pathway through preaching, teaching, and ministry teams. This will allow such churches to contextualize SouthPointe’s whole approach into their own setting.

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53. This number will capture only the people who immediately respond to their *Rooted* experience by seeking baptism. Therefore, it cannot even fully quantify *Rooted*'s impact on baptism, as others may respond with baptism after the initial ten-week experience.

54. This project will be able show only the short-term effects of *Rooted*. Its long-term effects will not be seen for years.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCIPLESHIP DISCOVERIES IN AN AVERAGE AMERICAN CHURCH

#### Introduction

At the beginning of this project, I hypothesized, “Shared, soul-training experiences will result in greater transformation than knowledge-based discipleship.” I believed this transformation could be measured by the following discipleship metrics: daily devotions, sacrificial generosity, service in the community, and the sharing of personal testimonies, in addition to the total number of baptisms and the breaking of strongholds.

The *Rooted* curriculum was used to test this hypothesis in SouthPointe’s context. It offered a similar vision and assessment of the problem facing an American church as SouthPointe. However, it claimed much greater discipleship results than SouthPointe has experienced.<sup>1</sup> The main difference between *Rooted*’s approach and SouthPointe’s previous approaches is *Rooted*’s provision of shared, soul-training experiences for its participants.

Likewise, SouthPointe made sense as a context to test *Rooted*’s claims of discipleship results. It is an average American church, as it mirrors the growth curve of the average American church: initial growth, followed by years of plateau. SouthPointe prepared all existing home groups to participate in *Rooted*, formed new groups as part of this initiative, and followed *Rooted*’s plan in order to test its claims in an average context.

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1. Allen White, “How Mariners’ Rooted Journey Grows Groups, Service and Giving,” Taking the Guesswork Out of Groups, April 25, 2016, accessed August 26, 2019, <http://allenwhite.org/2016/04/25/mariners-rooted-journey-grows-groups-service-giving/>. Mariners Church claims that 90 percent of *Rooted* groups become ongoing life groups, 82 percent of *Rooted* participants increase their generosity, and 70 percent of *Rooted* participants increase their serving.

This chapter evaluates SouthPointe’s discipleship efforts through *Rooted*, showing areas where the hypothesis was validated, ways it was invalidated, and future application. However, prior to describing these results, I offer an overview to help readers apply the discoveries of this chapter in their own context.

### **Thesis-Project Overview**

A brief overview is needed to help readers fully apply the discoveries of the research. This section neither validates nor invalidates the hypothesis but allows readers the opportunity notice similarities and differences between SouthPointe’s context and their own. This section discovers the demographics of the surveys, the assumption of alignment, *Rooted*’s system of support and preparation, and the commitment required by this curriculum.

I conducted both a pre-*Rooted* and post-*Rooted* survey. The pre-*Rooted* survey captured perspectives of 102 people, while 92 people participated in the post-*Rooted* survey. It is important to note that while all were *Rooted* participants, this was not the exact same group of people, as is evidenced by the slight differences in the age groups. Both surveys revealed a diversity of ages, with the thirties and fifties being the largest age groups, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Just under one third of the participants have children under 18, with 28.71% living with children *and* a partner or spouse, while 2.97% have children but no partner. The other two thirds of the participants were made up of those who have a partner but no children (37.62%) and those who are single (26.73%).

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2. The ages in the pre-*Rooted* surveys were 30-39 (31.37%), 50-59 (29.41%), 18-29 (12.75%), 60-69 (12.75%), and 40-49 (11.76%). Only one person over 70 participated in the initial survey. The ages in the post-*Rooted* survey were 30-49 (34.78%), 50-59 (26.09%), 40-49 (13%), 60-69 (11.96%), 18-29 (8.70%), and over 70 (5.43%).

The vast majority of people who completed the pre-*Rooted* survey have followed Jesus more than years 5 years: 89.11%. The other 10.89% have followed him less than five years, while nobody who does not follow Jesus answered this question. This was most surprising to me, because three of the eleven people in my group did not claim to follow Jesus and another group member has followed him less than five years.

*Rooted* was well attended. More than one third of people attended all ten of their group's weekly sessions and 54.35% attended eight or nine of the sessions, meaning that seven of eight participants participated in 80% of their group's meetings. The additional experiences were also well attended: more than 90% participated in their prayer experience; 84.62% participated in the opening night; and 70.33% participated in the serve experience.

Finally, these surveys provided a worthwhile comparison with SouthPointe's previous home group initiatives, as more than three quarters of people had been involved in a home group within the last year.<sup>3</sup> These people, especially the facilitators, have participated in SouthPointe's three prior approaches to groups, as described in chapter 1. SouthPointe groups initially followed the "biblical storytelling," then transitioned to a sermon-based discussion model, and most recently, "pick your own curriculum" approach.

In addition to the demographics of the survey, readers should note the alignment between SouthPointe and *Rooted*. Though this has already been stated, it is worth mentioning again for two reasons: others noticed the same, and it is vital for readers to understand that success of this initiative was based on this assumption. Stanley Mlyniec, a member of SouthPointe's shepherd

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3. Specifically, 76.24% of people in the pre-*Rooted* survey participated in home groups within the last twelve months.



team, who wrote the initial draft of SouthPointe’s doctrinal statement, noted *Rooted*’s strength here. “Prior to *Rooted*, I thought we needed a four-week class to teach people doctrine, since we have so many new Christians. But, after having gone through *Rooted*, I think we just need to have people go through it.”<sup>4</sup> He added later, “You could have stamped our name and logo on *Rooted*, and everyone would have thought that we wrote it.”<sup>5</sup> This alignment is an important assumption to be considered by practitioners who are selecting a curriculum for their own context.

The third overview area is the support and preparation given by those who lead *Rooted* on a national and regional level. Mariners Church provides extensive preparation and coaching. Jamie Lankford, the leader of SouthPointe’s whole *Rooted* initiative, said, “The support that *Rooted* gives you is phenomenal. They prepare you for launch and give best practice stuff. Their support is second to none.”<sup>6</sup> He also commented on the other material, “They provide videos for facilitators to watch prior to each week’s discussion; their appendices are really good. The beauty is that anybody could pick this up and use it.”<sup>7</sup> Not every discipleship resource, including the five resources I outlined in chapter 3, offers such adequate preparation and support.

Finally, readers need to know the commitment required by *Rooted* if they decide whether they want to use it. This high commitment was mentioned by three facilitators: Dave, Brian, and

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4. In a conversation with Stan Mlyniec on August 25, 2019.

5. In a conversation with Stan Mlyniec on November 12, 2019.

6. In a conversation with Jamie Lankford on December 16, 2019.

7. In a conversation with Jamie Lankford on December 16, 2019.

Bill. Dave wrote, “It is a HUGE commitment. Much more than other studies/curriculums I’ve led.”<sup>8</sup> Brian noted how much work it is for a facilitator. He specifically mentioned that he was glad that he first participated in the pilot group prior to leading. His pilot group experience allowed him to read the devotions and personally complete the answers. This allowed him more time, when he became a facilitator, to prepare for leading the group. He did not think he would have been able to complete personally the devotions for the first time, while also preparing to lead the group.<sup>9</sup> However, positively, Bill said he was glad to know the level of commitment up front. He also believes that participants’ upfront knowledge of the commitment led to more consistent preparation.<sup>10</sup>

### **Validation for the Thesis-Project**

Dallas Willard encouraged churches to answer two questions (as I have previously quoted): “First, what is our plan for making disciples?”<sup>11</sup> This whole project has sought to answer this question for SouthPointe, as well as help the average American church begin to answer this question. Willard’s follow-up question is, “Second, does our plan work?”<sup>12</sup> This

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8. In a conversation through text message with Dave Meysembourg on December 11, 2019.

9. In a conversation with Brian Grant on December 15, 2019.

10. In a conversation with Bill Ellis on December 18, 2019.

11. Mike Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders* (Pawley Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2012), Kindle ed., location 387.

12. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, location 387.

section demonstrates ways in which *Rooted* has worked, while the next section shows ways in which it has not worked.

However, prior to identifying the validation of my hypothesis, two reminders need to be restated. First, research data are limited in measuring true discipleship, assuming that transformation is both external and internal. This data presented in this section measure discipleship metrics, which are largely external actions. It cannot truly reveal the state of a participant's heart, which only God can truly see.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the hope is that increase in discipleship metrics has led to heart transformation.

Second, and related, I expected to find a difference between those who participated more frequently than those who participated less frequently. This can be applied to participation in group meetings, daily devotions, or the additional experiences, such as the prayer and serve experiences. This was largely confirmed by the surveys, as I detail in this section. However, there was one outlier survey. This person participated in all ten group meetings and completed daily devotions four to five times a week, as well as the prayer and serve experiences, but said that *Rooted* did not impact her relationship with God, did not grow her courage or dependence on God, did not increase her desire to share her faith story. She also reported that she does not want to continue in her group. This survey will be noted as the outlier through this section.

There are six ways in which this hypothesis was validated: a desire for groups to continue to meet after *Rooted*, an increase in daily devotions, an improved relationship with God, more time spent serving the community, greater generosity, and an increase in participants sharing their faith story. This section will detail how the quantitative and qualitative research validates

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13. Reiterating my point from chapter 2, the Pharisees succeeded at some discipleship metrics, but Jesus pronounces woes on them in Matthew 23.

the increase in these discipleship metrics (specifically connecting the *Rooted*'s shared, soul-training experiences as the contributing factor for such growth, in some cases), as well as connect this transformation to the vision, theological vision, and culture of SouthPointe.

First, *Rooted* succeeded in the creation and desire for people to participate in small groups. All thirteen *Rooted* groups have agreed to continue to meet. Of the 92 people surveyed after *Rooted*, 84 committed to continuing with their current group, and 4 more were undecided. Only 4 would not continue with their group, with logistical factors being the deciding factor for 2 such people.<sup>14</sup>

The qualitative research supplements the quantitative research in order to reinforce this success. An interview with Brian Turner was most notable. Brian, a *Rooted* facilitator who has participated in and led similar small groups in multiple states prior to moving to Rhode Island and joining SouthPointe two years ago, claimed that *Rooted*'s greatest strength was the manner in which it built intimacy throughout the ten weeks. "The fact that everyone shared their story was huge. Then, when you see how it built over time: the prayer experience, then serving together, the sharing of strongholds, and finally the blessing week. It did a really good job of building intimacy through the ten weeks."<sup>15</sup>

This success reinforces the theological vision, as described in chapter 2. "The sharing of discipleship experiences is important because it contrasts the isolating nature and isolating

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14. One was the outlier.

15. In a conversation with Brian Turner on December 15, 2019.

impact of sin. Sin isolates, and isolation causes sin.”<sup>16</sup> This hiding, as demonstrated by Adam, Eve, and David, was more than just a physical hiding; it was spiritual in nature. It is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18), for isolation and sin create a vicious cycle. But *Rooted* helps build intimacy throughout.

Second, people increased the frequency of daily devotions through their *Rooted* experience. *Rooted*’s daily devotions include both Scripture and prayer. More than half of the participants (52.22%) completed four to five devotions per week.<sup>17</sup> However, prior to *Rooted*, nearly that same percentage of people (55%) read Scripture two times or fewer per week, and even fewer (65%) wrote out their prayers and reflected on Scripture fewer than two times per week.<sup>18</sup>

*Rooted* facilitators connected this increase in daily devotions to the way in which these devotions were shared. Lee Ellis, a shepherd team member and *Rooted* facilitator, noted how these devotions not only help people create habits but also keep people in connection with others.<sup>19</sup> Tyler Nobis, a *Rooted* facilitator, noted how the *Rooted* process of having people work through devotions in advance changed the dynamic of his group: “People are so much more engaged. Previously, we taught a small lesson and then tried to have a discussion. It was like

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16. This quote is restated from chapter 2.

17. Another 35.56% completed two to three devotions in an average, while only 12.22% completed only zero to one devotions per week.

18. Specifically, 42.42% of people reflected once or twice a week, while 22.22% never reflected on Scripture and wrote out their prayers.

19. In a conversation with Lee Ellis on December 18, 2019.

pulling teeth. However, now people are so ready to talk that it is difficult to even finish the discussion.”<sup>20</sup>

The practice of daily devotions, when shared, has the ability to connect people to God and others. Thus, it reinforces the theology of the Trinity and the doctrine of creation. The Trinity highlights the oneness within community. The doctrine of creation reinforces and builds upon the Trinity, by inviting people to share in the eternal and selfless love within the Trinity. The simple practice of sharing devotions helps people know God and others.

Third, people claimed that their relationship with God improved. Of the 92 people who took the post-*Rooted* survey, only 4 gave a neutral or negative response to the question, “How did *Rooted* impact or change your relationship with God?” Two of these 4 admitted to completing only zero or one devotions per week; while another respondent attended fewer than five of the group sessions, missed the prayer and serve experiences, and completed two to three devotions per week.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, with the exception of the outlier, all those who participated in the weekly group meetings completed the daily devotions and participated in the prayer and serve experiences specified improvement in their relationship with God.<sup>22</sup>

Bill Ellis, leader of the shepherd team and *Rooted* facilitator, pointed to the experiential strength of *Rooted* as the reason for this. He said *Rooted* was cohesive *because* it was experiential and that this experience led to real growth. Similarly, Tanya Turner commented specifically on the prayer experience in her group. “One group member said, ‘I didn’t want to

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20. In a conversation with Tyler Nobis on November 7, 2019.

21. The other was the outlier.

22. As reported in the post-*Rooted* survey.

come tonight. I'm not sure about this.' This confession then prompted every other group member to confess the same feeling. However, afterward, during the debriefing, each person was glad for the experience and noted how it strengthened their faith."<sup>23</sup>

This experience moved people closer to the experience of the early church, and specifically to Acts 2:42-47, which is the aim of *Rooted*.<sup>24</sup> The early church demonstrated the importance of praying and fasting together (Acts 13:2; 14:23). In SouthPointe's context, the number of people who participated in *Rooted*'s prayer experience was a far more effective way of praying together than anything in its history.<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, *Rooted* helped increase the number of hours in which the community was served. Prior to *Rooted*, 44.55% had not served the community outside the church and an additional 35.64% had served only one to three hours in the last three months.<sup>26</sup> This means that 8 out of 10 people had served the community an average of one hour per month or less prior to *Rooted*. However, more than 70% of people participated in their group's serve experience. Even if the serving experience was the only experience serving the community, it still increased the hours.

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23. In a conversation with Bill Ellis on December 18, 2019.

24. Mariners Church, *Rooted: Connect with God, the Church, Your Purpose* (2011), version 2.0, 13.

25. Prior to *Rooted*, SouthPointe's prayer gatherings averaged only 10 total people.

26. The remaining nearly 20% of people were nearly split between those who served between four to ten hours over the last three months (10.89%) and those who served more than ten hours (8.91%).

Qualitatively, SallyAnne Lund, a shepherd team member and *Rooted* facilitator, noted that the shared experiences were a strength of *Rooted*, claiming that the serve experience was individually beneficial and, thus, contributed toward discipleship.<sup>27</sup>

This increase not only validates transformational power for discipleship but also reinforces the theological vision of chapter 2. *Rooted* groups served the homeless and the surrounding community by serving the local elementary school, orphans and children in the foster care system, veterans in need, and the elderly. This action is consistent with God's character and heart, and at least partially applies Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Theologically, showing such love glorifies God because it demonstrates his character to the world.

Fifth, there was an increase in sacrificial generosity. There are three qualitative indicators of this increase. First, prior to *Rooted*, 41.83% of those who answered the question regarding the percentage of money given said that they gave 10% or more.<sup>28</sup> After *Rooted*, the percentage number of such people raised to 64.9%. Second, only 5 of the 68 people who answered the post-*Rooted* survey question, "Do you have a generosity goal?", answered negatively. The other 63 people answered affirmatively, with some specifying their goal.<sup>29</sup> Third, there was an increase in collective giving at SouthPointe after *Rooted*'s week, which focused on stewardship. Unlike normal *Rooted* group meetings, this week called for all groups to meet together to hear a speaker

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27. In a conversation with SallyAnne Lund. She also noted the way in which the prayer experience led to deeper intimacy.

28. An additional 24.49% of people gave 5-9%, while 33.67% of people gave 4% or less.

29. As detailed in the open-ended question on the post-*Rooted* survey.



and then divide into individual *Rooted* groups. This took place on November, 24, 2019, and volunteer leader Ray Powers shared his story of faith and finances.

While I anticipated some to increase their sacrificial generosity, I did not expect the collective growth in December. The first week of December saw an offering that was more than three times 2019's average weekly offering, or put another way, it was a 67% increase over the highest weekly offering in SouthPointe's history. SouthPointe had designated the next week as a Big Give,<sup>30</sup> announcing that it would give away its seven-day offering to the local Boys and Girls Club, single parents in the community, and Missions of Hope in Nairobi, Kenya. It was the largest Big Give in SouthPointe's history, as it gave away \$44,876. Even after these two record-setting weeks, the following week saw an offering that was 50% greater than 2019's average weekly offering. Since I do not know how much any one person gives, this data cannot be directly linked to *Rooted*. However, given the high percentage of SouthPointe people who participated, *Rooted* is likely a contributing factor.

This generosity not only demonstrates transformation but also fulfills, at least partially, part of theological vision. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16). One hopes the generosity and service displayed to the community has glorified God.

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30. This is the name of the offering I described in chapter 1, "when SouthPointe was fourteen months old and decided to give away one Sunday's offer to meeting needs locally and globally. Though the attendance was less than 200 and the average Sunday offering was \$2,500, SouthPointe gave away more than \$27,000. That number increased to \$32,000 the next year, and \$42,000 and \$43,000 in subsequent years."

Sixth, *Rooted* increased the number of people who shared their faith story. Prior to *Rooted*, 38.61% had not shared their faith story in the last three months, and an additional 44.55% had shared their story only one or two times.<sup>31</sup> However, after *Rooted*, almost two thirds of people shared their story once or twice (65.56%). Only 17.78% did not share their faith in the three months.

While the research may not directly tie the sharing of one's faith story outside of group to *Rooted*'s practice of sharing one's story inside of group meetings, it is still valuable to note its impact. Bill Ellis noted that everyone sharing their stories "pulled people together."<sup>32</sup> SallyAnne Lund noted "hearing God's work in people's stories and how people weren't all alike."<sup>33</sup> Jamie Lankford commented on how the sharing of stories "set the tone for transparency and vulnerability, to be known and loved,"<sup>34</sup> which is a priority at SouthPointe.<sup>35</sup>

This increased number of people sharing their faith leads to a greater fulfillment of SouthPointe's vision of "everyone experiencing God's unconditional love," as God's love is spread by verbally sharing the gospel. Jesus himself called his disciples to be witnesses, or

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31. To complete the statistics, 6.93% of people shared their faith story three or four times in the last three months, while 9.9% of people shared their testimony more than five times.

32. In a conversation with Bill Ellis on December 18, 2019.

33. In a conversation with SallyAnne Lund on December 15, 2019.

34. In a conversation with Jamie Lankford on December 16, 2019.

35. Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 150-51. "In a sense, they're organizational proverbs—a list of pithy sayings that describe clearly and consciously what we value and what I expect our staff to think through when making ministry decisions." SouthPointe's plumb lines are currently communicated only internally to staff and shepherd team. The specific plumb line quoted here states, "We are open and honest (and sometimes awkward): We choose authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability over avoiding awkwardness."

people who testify. Such witnessing results in “spreading the name of Jesus,” as well as “the word of God”<sup>36</sup> advancing. This ultimately results in God being glorified (Acts 13:48).

### **Invalidation for the Thesis-Project**

While *Rooted* mostly validated my hypothesis, this section covers ways in which *Rooted* did not work completely. It includes elaboration on one expectation that went unmet, three weaknesses identified in chapter 3 which were confirmed through interviewing *Rooted* facilitators, and one main critique based on the nature of the curriculum itself.

First, I had expected more people to be baptized through the ten weeks of *Rooted* than over the average ten-week period. That expectation did not come to fruition. SouthPointe saw 26 people choose to be baptized over the first thirty-nine weeks of the year, for an average of 2 baptisms per three weeks. However, only 2 people were baptized in the ten weeks of *Rooted*, and there were no baptisms at *Rooted*’s final celebration. But, as I previously noted, while this number is worth measuring, it will undoubtedly provide less substantial data than the surveys or facilitator interviews.<sup>37</sup>

Second, three *Rooted* facilitators also noted weaknesses I mentioned in chapter 3. Stan Mlyniec commented on the lack of Sabbath,<sup>38</sup> as I believe the comparison with James Bryan

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36. As I quoted in chapter 2.

37. This number will capture only the people who immediately responded to their *Rooted* experience by seeking baptism. Therefore, it cannot even fully quantify *Rooted*’s impact on baptism, as others may respond with baptism after the initial ten-week experience.

38. In a conversation with Stan Mlyniec on November 12, 2019.

Smith's books exposed.<sup>39</sup> Tanya Turner noted how *Rooted* was great in creating the habit of daily devotions, but it didn't teach people how to directly read Scripture.<sup>40</sup> This critique, I believe, was also brought to light through comparison with Jim Putman's material.<sup>41</sup> Bill Ellis noted how the topic of one-on-one discipleship was virtually left out of *Rooted*,<sup>42</sup> as is also seen by comparing it with Michael Breen's resources.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, there was one main critique: while *Rooted* covered an impressive number of topics in ten weeks, it did not cover any topic in great depth. Stan Mlyniec elaborated, "You could probably follow *Rooted* by spending four weeks on each of the weeks of *Rooted*." This critique manifested itself by failing to produce transformation in two main areas: the breaking of strongholds and connecting people to their purpose.

First, no participant specifically mentioned the freedom from strongholds in any post-*Rooted* survey. Qualitatively, facilitators positively mentioned the effect of breaking into gender-specific subgroups during the "freedom from strongholds" week but said that a single meeting

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39. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010).

40. In a conversation with Tanya Turner on December 15, 2019.

41. Jim Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport: A Championship Strategy for Doing Ministry Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2008); Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010); Jim Putman, Avery T. Willis Jr., Brandon Guindon, and Bill Krause, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual: Equipping Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

42. In a conversation with Bill Ellis on December 18, 2019.

43. Mike Breen and Steve Cockrum, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Making Disciples Like Jesus Did*, 2nd ed. (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimensions Ministries, 2012), Kindle ed.; Mike Breen, *Multiplied Missional Leaders* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimensions Ministries, 2012), Kindle ed.

was not enough. Lee Ellis, a shepherd team member and *Rooted* facilitator, called the stronghold week “one and done.” She said, “There needs to be more. There needs to be follow-up, because we had some big ones [strongholds] shared.” She noted not only how these big ones needed more time, but also that they dominated the conversation, and those with “lesser” strongholds did not have adequate time to share.<sup>44</sup> Some groups tried to rectify this by continuing to break into male and female subgroups at the end of the group conversation. However, Lee’s husband, Bill, said that there was not enough time for his group to complete everything outlined in future *Rooted* weeks and break into gender-specific groups for stronghold conversation.<sup>45</sup>

This critique means that more focus is need to apply continually and find the healing James references: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16).

Second, the introductory nature of *Rooted* did not foster the discovery of gifts and purpose. *Rooted*’s goal is to connect people with God, the church, and their purpose.<sup>46</sup> It seems to succeed most at the first two parts of that statement, but it lacked in connecting people to their purpose. The survey reinforced this discovery. An overwhelming number of people mentioned their connection with the church and improved relationship with God.<sup>47</sup> However, the survey answers to the open-ended question, “How did *Rooted* help connect you with your purpose?”,

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44. In a conversation with Lee Ellis on December 18, 2019.

45. In a conversation with Bill Ellis on December 18, 2019.

46. Mariners Church, *Rooted: Connect with God, the Church, Your Purpose* (2011), version 2.0. This phrase is the subtitle of the book.

47. In the post-*Rooted* survey, every participant noted a deeper connection with the church and only 4 mentioned that their relationship with God did not improve.

were mostly positive, they were also very general. For example, “It helped me see how God can use a story like mine,”<sup>48</sup> and “Reinforced my relationships,”<sup>49</sup> and “God has a plan for me.”<sup>50</sup>

There were also 14 others who specifically answered that they did not receive any more clarity in reference to their purpose. Their answers included “Not sure yet”<sup>51</sup> and “Still working on this”<sup>52</sup> or “No impact”<sup>53</sup> and “Still struggling with that”<sup>54</sup> or “Work in progress.”<sup>55</sup>

*Rooted* leaders also noticed this. Todd Mather, a *Rooted* facilitator who has been with SouthPointe from its first day, said, “The week on spiritual giftedness was the weakest. It needed to be longer. Think if everyone functioned in their spiritual giftedness. For some churches, this is the lifeblood.”<sup>56</sup> Jamie Lankford agreed, “The spiritual gift assessments were not the greatest.”<sup>57</sup>

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48. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 28.

49. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 73.

50. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 79.

51. Post-*Rooted* survey, participants 26-27.

52. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 61.

53. Post-*Rooted* survey, participants 57, 58, 59.

54. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 84.

55. Post-*Rooted* survey, participant 91.

56. In a conversation with Jamie Lankford on December 16, 2019.

57. In a conversation with Jamie Lankford on December 16, 2019.

Bethany Green, a *Rooted* facilitator, said, “We could have used a whole follow-up discussion on gift discovery.”<sup>58</sup>

In my second chapter, I noted that the establishment of a theological vision allows a local church like SouthPointe to answer questions such as “What method will be utilized to shape people’s attitudes and actions by the gospel? How will participants be involved in the city or community? *In what way will SouthPointe catalyze the discovery and use of one’s spiritual gifts?* How will the church live ‘one another’ commands, as well as the call to pray and demonstrate spiritual disciplines?” While *Rooted* seems to answer three of those four questions well, a supplemental resource is needed to answer “In what way will SouthPointe catalyze the discovery and use of one’s spiritual gifts?”

### **Application**

Discoveries made through SouthPointe’s *Rooted* initiative and the ensuing research will affect every part of its ministry. This section answers key questions regarding how these learnings will impact SouthPointe’s small groups’ ministry, its ministry teams, Sunday mornings, and family ministry.

The first and most basic question within the small group ministry is, “Will SouthPointe continue to offer *Rooted*?” The answer is a resounding yes. *Rooted* will continue to occupy its place in SouthPointe’s discipleship pathway. It will be the entry into group life at SouthPointe, unless someone desires to begin with Starting Point. *Rooted* will be the program by which new groups form. Groups, after they complete *Rooted*, will be encouraged to stay together and

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58. In a conversation with Bethany Green on December 15, 2019.

continue to be employ aspects of their *Rooted* experience. This, then, triggers follow-up questions about how such discoveries will affect new groups, as well as how they will impact groups after they complete *Rooted*.

Regarding the formation of new *Rooted* groups, one may ask, “In what way will this initial *Rooted* experience shape the launch of new *Rooted* groups in the future?” Specifically, “How will SouthPointe respond to the critique of *Rooted*’s high commitment?” SouthPointe will not lessen the requirements set out by *Rooted*, as some churches do.<sup>59</sup> Rather, the leaders of the entire group ministry have already begun to develop a system of best practices and material for future leaders. The first application of this principle has been to compile a packet for all *Rooted* leaders. This packet includes material aids, such as laminated memory cards of all weekly memory verses for all participants, printed prayer prompts for the prayer experience, and when time arises, communion supplies for the taking of communion.

In reference to *Rooted* groups that continue meeting after *Rooted*’s initial ten weeks, one may ask, “How will *Rooted* shape SouthPointe’s group experience?” All groups will maintain the emphasis on the shared, soul-training experiences. Each group will be expected to complete one prayer experience and one serve experience every quarter. Small group ministry leaders may provide prayer prompts and will continue to arrange logistics with these serve experiences. Groups will be encouraged to serve with the same community partner to develop long-term relationship. Finally, groups will also be encouraged to break into gender-specific subgroups two or three times a quarter to discuss strongholds.

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59. In a conversation with James McKinzie, a discipleship pastor at Central Christian Church in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, on December 31, 2019. As the churchwide *Rooted* leader, James stated that Central Christian Church does not ask groups to schedule additional prayer and serve experiences but weaves them into a normal weekly group meeting.



One final small-group-related question is, “What are the keys to long-term success?” There are three keys, two which will be mentioned here and one which will be mentioned in a future question. The first key is in *Rooted*’s long-term success in the identification and development of potential leaders. The second key is that SouthPointe must help groups maintain a consistent direction after the initial ten weeks of *Rooted*, maintaining the shared, soul-training experiences and habits developed through *Rooted*. Also, groups may go deeper into either spiritual gift assessment, a course on how to read the actual Bible, or one-on-one discipleship, since all are weaknesses of *Rooted*.

*Rooted*’s impact extends far beyond SouthPointe’s small groups’ ministry. A normal practitioner may ask, “In what ways will it impact Sunday mornings?” There are three answers. First, Sunday mornings must be recognized as a key to *Rooted*’s success. Specifically, Sunday mornings must be used, at least partially, to help attendees enter the discipleship pathway, since disciples are made through small groups.<sup>60</sup> SouthPointe will continue to promote such engagement directly through sign-ups, but also indirectly through the celebrating of stories and giving illustrations through the *Rooted* curriculum. Identifying this as a key also clarifies a metric of success: growing the percentage of people who are on the discipleship pathway, rather than only measuring Sunday morning attendance. Second, *Rooted* provides a greater opportunity to share individual faith stories and testimonies on a Sunday morning, since all *Rooted* participants are encouraged to write out such stories. SouthPointe will aim to develop a storytelling team to share written versions of these stories via social media. Third, SouthPointe will teach a series on the Sabbath in the fall of 2020.

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60. This plumb line states, “We make disciples through small groups.”

A related question is, “How will *Rooted* impact ministry teams at SouthPointe?” Though the topic of Sabbath is virtually absent from *Rooted*’s material, SouthPointe can demonstrate and teach Sabbath through its approach to ministry teams and volunteers. SouthPointe has a plumb line that states, “We prioritize health for everyone: A healthy church needs healthy leaders who look out for the health of SouthPointers. Leaders should lead with margin and help volunteers have margin.”<sup>61</sup> SouthPointe seeks to demonstrate Sabbath in three ways. The first application is to honor volunteers’ time through clear, upfront, and follow-up communication. In 2019, SouthPointe ministry leaders sought to honor volunteers by writing a role description, which included normal items such as a purpose statement of responsibilities, but also the estimated amount of time per week or month and the length of this commitment, which is usually twelve months.<sup>62</sup> In 2020, ministry leaders will seek to honor volunteers by following up with each volunteer to ask if they want to continue serving in their existing role. Second, SouthPointe also highly encourages people to serve in only one ministry team, and its leaders seek to live through SouthPointe’s non-silo approach.<sup>63</sup> Third, Sabbath is also demonstrated visibly through its Sunday morning approach, specifically regarding preaching and worship leading. I preached only thirty-nine times in 2019, and SouthPointe’s worship director seeks first and foremost to equip team members.

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61. This is another SouthPointe plumb line to guide its ministry approach.

62. Such a commitment is non-binding. The purpose of setting such a date is mostly to give leaders a mechanism to follow-up with volunteers, so they do not reach a point of burnout.

63. SouthPointe staff leaders commit to prioritizing the good of the whole church and the individual over one’s own team.

Finally, “How does *Rooted* impact family ministry at SouthPointe?” The answer is twofold. First, *Rooted* aligns well with the curriculum used in the family ministry, called Grow. Grow simplifies *Rooted*’s seven rhythms to four: spend time with God, spend time with others, use your gifts, and share your story.<sup>64</sup> Second, the alignment of both curricula presents a future opportunity to develop a parental discipleship program, training parents to disciple their children by employing shared, soul-training experiences as a family.

### Conclusion

There is no scriptural command to plant church — only to make disciples. While church planting is one of the most effective methods to disciple making,<sup>65</sup> that effectiveness wanes over time in the average American church.<sup>66</sup> This forces church plants, as well as established churches, to wrestle with the questions, “Why does a church plant’s growth plateau after three years? What would it take to prevent that plateau in the first place? Or, what would be required to reverse that trend in a real-life church plant with a sustained plateau or decline?”

There is no shortage of potential answers to these questions, as SouthPointe’s experience confirms. However, the root answer to this question is “discipleship.” An average church cannot

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64. Grow, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://growcurriculum.org/childrens-ministry-curriculum/>. While “freedom from strongholds” is not addressed directly through this youth curriculum, the other six of *Rooted*’s rhythms are addressed directly or indirectly.

65. David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), locations 2730-31, Kindle.

66. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, locations 2772-73.

have “healthy soil” to produce transformation,<sup>67</sup> let alone multiply churches, campuses, or leaders, without effective discipleship. Yet, assuming the average American church makes discipleship efforts, the question must be asked, “Is there a missing element that would catalyze transformation and multiplication?” The answer, I believe, is yes. Shared, soul-training experiences are missing from the average discipleship approach.

The normal church leader of the average church asks, “Given this information and research, where do I start?” Or, stated more specifically, “Where does an average church that has Sunday gatherings with singing and a sermon, ministry teams and volunteers, a budget and a building, begin?”

I would encourage practitioners to begin with theology. In my second chapter I stated that “the real significance of discipleship lies in theology, not in its functionality,” and “theology has three distinct qualities: it is biblical, livable, and systematic.”<sup>68</sup> Livable theology is more than information to be downloaded, but it systematically touches and transforms everyday life.

One may ask, “What does it mean to start with theology, especially in a world where the average church already has a doctrinal statement?” Specifically, as a result of completing this project, my encouragement to normal practitioners is to begin by articulating their own theological vision. A theological vision is more practical than just a doctrinal statement and more theological than a “how-to” approach to ministry.

Establishing a theological vision forces practitioners to articulate a theology that is biblical, systematic, and livable. This practice forces leaders to think through a ministry approach

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67. Kevin Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to the Great* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 17-18.

68. Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2001), 16-17.

that focuses on both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Formulating a theological vision urges practitioners to contextualize the gospel for a particular church, located in its own unique time and place. Finally, it aids in solidifying an approach to discipleship. While there are many helpful and inspirational resources available today to aid in such an effort, not every resource fits every context. Some, however, provide more theory than practical and livable principles in an average context.

*Rooted* aligns both with SouthPointe's theological vision and is the most clear, holistic, accessible, implementable, and foundational discipleship resource for an average American church. Foundationally, it provides the most systematic theology of any resource mentioned, combining both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Holistically, it provides discipleship habits, specifically shared, soul-training experiences. It is accessible and simple, clarifying the definition of a disciple and steps toward such maturity. It is also implementable to an average church, providing support, resources, and curriculum.

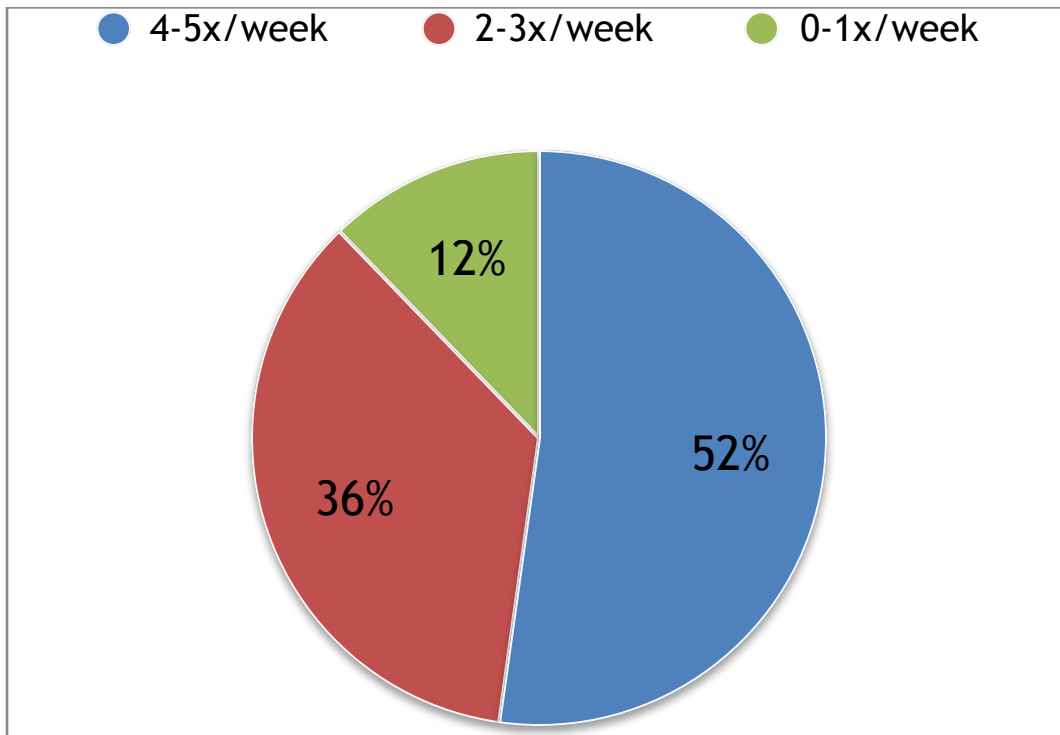
If normal church leaders get anything right in their average churches, may they get discipleship right. May this project help fellow practitioners apply the words of Robert Coleman, "Surely if the pattern of Jesus at this point means anything at all, it teaches that the first duty of a church leadership is to see to it that a foundation is laid in the beginning on which can be built an effective and continuing evangelistic ministry to the multitudes."<sup>69</sup> If church leaders today get anything right, may they get discipleship right.

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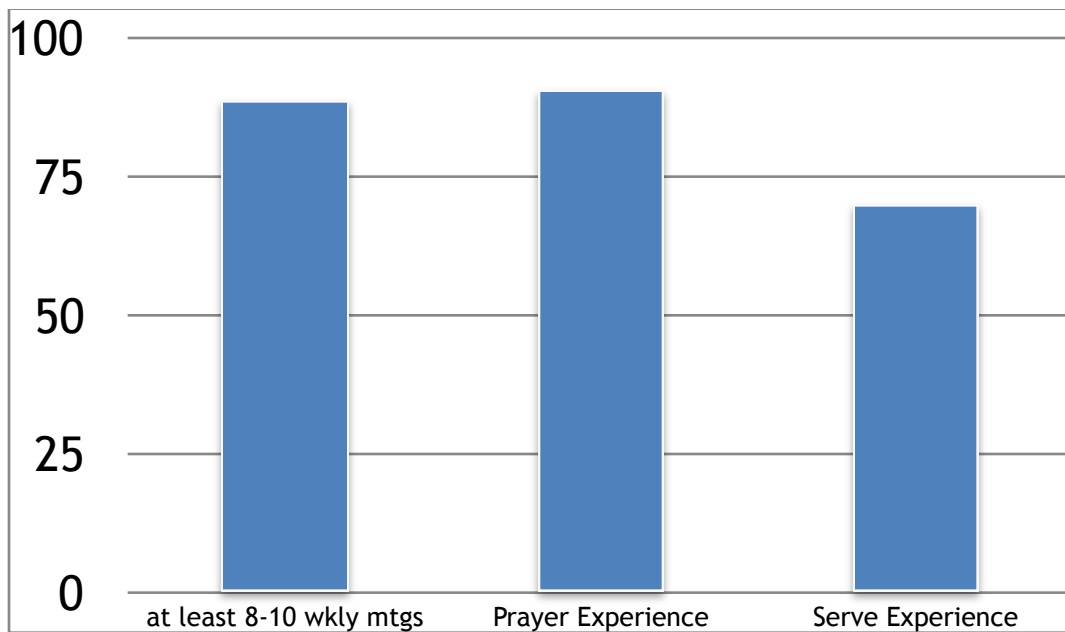
69. Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1993), 32.

## Appendix

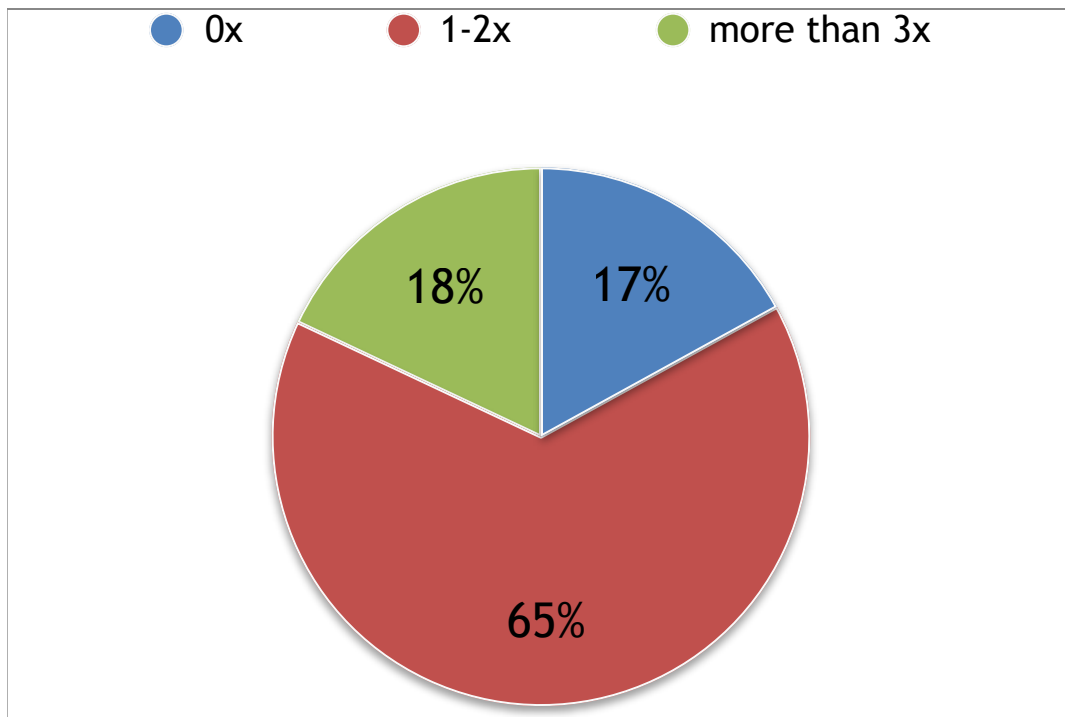
Frequency of Devotions Completed Through Rooted



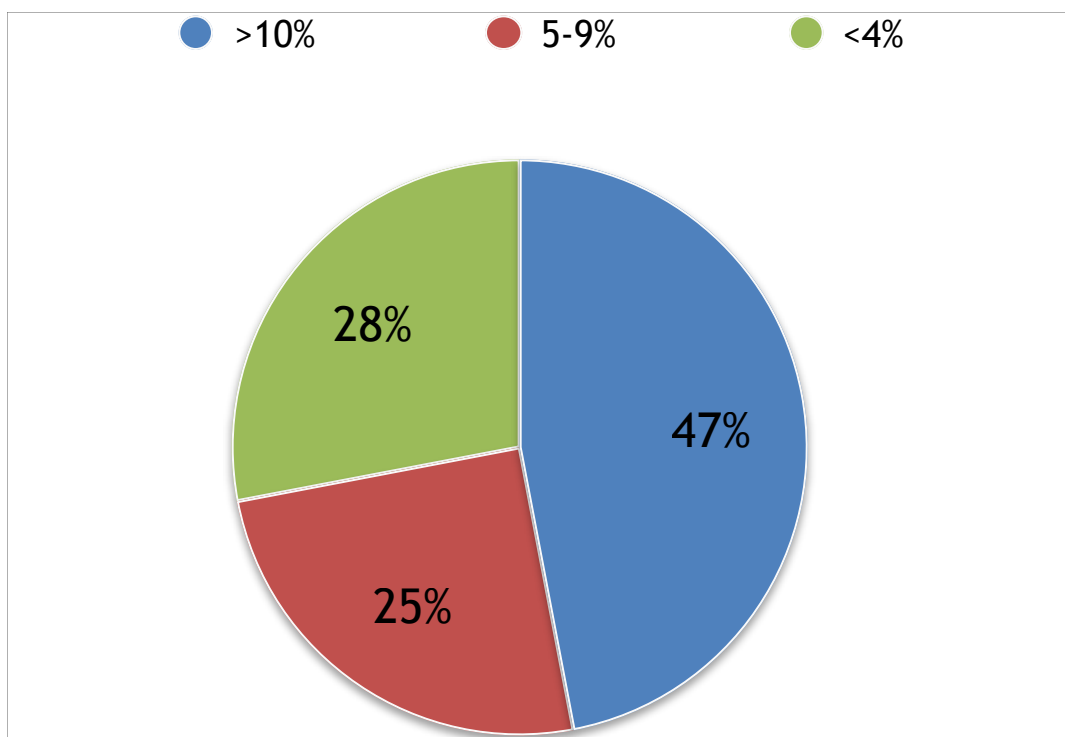
Attendance by Percentage Through Rooted



Frequency of Shared Testimonies Through Rooted



Givers by percentage (post-Rooted)



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